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A SIMPLE GENTLEMAN





# A Simple Gentleman

A NOVEL

BY  
JOHN STRANGE WINTER

Author of .

"Bootles' Baby," "The Price of a Wife,"

"The Strange Story of My Life,"

"Everybody's Favourite," "Sister Anne,"

"A Blaze of Glory," etc., etc.



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# CONTENTS

	PAGE
CHAPTER I - - - - -	1
CHAPTER II - - - - -	11
CHAPTER III - - - - -	21
CHAPTER IV - - - - -	32
CHAPTER V - - - - -	43
CHAPTER VI - - - - -	53
CHAPTER VII - - - - -	63
CHAPTER VIII - - - - -	74
CHAPTER IX - - - - -	83
CHAPTER X - - - - -	93
CHAPTER XI - - - - -	104
CHAPTER XII - - - - -	114
CHAPTER XIII - - - - -	124
CHAPTER XIV - - - - -	136
CHAPTER XV - - - - -	146
CHAPTER XVI - - - - -	156
CHAPTER XVII - - - - -	166
CHAPTER XVIII - - - - -	177
CHAPTER XIX - - - - -	187
CHAPTER XX - - - - -	197
CHAPTER XXI - - - - -	205
CHAPTER XXII - - - - -	214
CHAPTER XXIII - - - - -	224
CHAPTER XXIV - - - - -	233
CHAPTER XXV - - - - -	243
CHAPTER XXVI - - - - -	251
CHAPTER XXVII - - - - -	261
CHAPTER XXVIII - - - - -	272
CHAPTER XXIX - - - - -	281
CHAPTER XXX - - - - -	291



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## CHAPTER I

L'ESTRANGE was puzzled. It happened one lovely June morning when, fagged out by the joys and cares of a three weeks' march, he had at length reached the haven of Blankhampton Barracks, and had a glance round the old town, and had decided in his own mind that he was going to have an extremely good time there. But the first morning in barracks after a march is naturally a very busy one, and when he reached the mess-room for lunch, he found a letter bearing the local post mark awaiting him. It was a perfumed letter, not vulgarly perfumed, but softly and seductively redolent of a fair lady. On the flap was printed in plain red characters, "7 Little Ogledal, Blankhampton." The handwriting was unfamiliar, the quality of the paper undeniable. Having thus examined the outside in a manner quite foreign to his ordinary procedure, he tore the cover and took out the letter which it contained. It began, "My dear Mr. L'Estrange,—We are quite overjoyed to find that



you are in the new regiment just come to Blankhampton. Dick and I hope that you will lose no time in coming down to see us. Won't you take pot luck to-night at eight o'clock? It seems ages since we met, as we never had that little dinner in town as we arranged."

I think that L'Estrange's countenance must, at that moment, have shown an expression of intense astonishment, for one of his brother officers, looking across the ante-room, happened to catch sight of him.

"Hullo, Chickweed," he said, "who's the letter from?"

"Dashed if I know," said L'Estrange.

"What, have they pounced on you already?"

"Pounced! Not exactly that, either—it's somebody I knew before," he said with a wave of his hand. For he was not minded to tell the whole of his private affairs to all and sundry.

So he thrust the letter away in the breast of his frock coat, and followed in the wake of the Chief, who was just then moving in the direction of lunch. Once in his own quarters, however, he sat down in his big chair, filled his pipe, and read the letter again.

"My dear Mr. L'Estrange—Dick and I—pot luck—eight o'clock—little dinner in town—yours as always, Lettice Charteris."

"Lettice Charteris! Now, who the devil was Lettice Charteris?" his thoughts ran. "Where

had he met her? Who was Dick? What was the little dinner in town to which she alluded? Was she Mrs. or Miss? Was Dick husband or brother?" Yes, certainly, L'Estrange was puzzled.

The writing was firm, clear and *distingué*, the scent, as I have said before, was subtle and redolent of charm, the paper was good, the crest in the corner was modest, the address—he knew nothing about that, but presumably it was all right. Pot luck at eight o'clock! Should he or shouldn't he? Should he go down and call—what the devil should he do? He couldn't write Miss if she were Mrs., he couldn't write Mrs. if she were Miss. Nothing about the note was familiar, neither the writing, the style, the perfume, nor even the name of the lady. Where could he have seen her before—where could they have met—how could they have been on terms for her to write so intimately if he, who was ordinarily blessed with a good memory, had utterly forgotten her as if she had never been?

What should he do? Should he go down and call, then fumble with the name when the man or the maid came to the door? "Dick and I—are delighted." Well, L'Estrange *was* puzzled. He meant to go, oh yes, a woman who could send such an aroma of interest in a single note was certainly worth going to dine with, particularly as in all the town and neighbourhood, he did not know so much as a single soul. Yes, he would

certainly go. He had got thus far in his meditations when there came a thump-thump on the door.

"You there, Chickweed?"

"Yes, yes," said L'Estrange, without turning his head, "come in."

The young man who entered in response to this invitation was dressed in the lightest of gray tweed clothes, and was very tall, very thin, and had an ingenuous baby face which he carried considerably over six feet above ground.

"I came in," he said, in a curious high pitched voice, "to see what you were after doing."

"I'm going down into the town."

"Well, naturally. I'm going to walk."

"I'll go with you if you'll wait till I've got out of my paint."

"Oh, I'll wait. I say, Chickweed."

"M—m?"

"I saw such a pretty girl last night."

"Did you? What was she doing? Did she see you?"

"Gad! Did she see me? Trust any pretty girl to see me," said the youngster with a certain dignity of bearing. "By Jove, she was a pretty girl! I saw her in St. Thomas Street, I suppose that stands for the High Street in Blankhampton. She had blue eyes and red hair."

"Of course," said L'Estrange.

"There's no 'of course' about it; the last pretty girl I saw had black hair and brown eyes."

"Ah, then you didn't tell me about her."

"Didn't I? What could I have been thinking of? It was just as we were coming through that pretty village before we stopped at Darcaster. She was looking over a wall by the church—shouldn't wonder if she were the parson's daughter. She had a white linen sort of frock and a wide panama sort of hat set right on the back of her head. She was leaning her arms on the wall—it was a high moss grown wall, with brick trimmings—and I looked at her, and she looked at me."

"I saw her."

"Oh, you did, now did you?"

"Yes, I saw her, Toddy."

"And you thought her pretty?" said Toddy.

"Yes, I did, but you've been faithful so long to red hair and blue eyes, that it didn't occur to me that she'd have any fetch for you. But this charmer is quite in the usual style?"

"No, she isn't, not a bit. She had red hair, dark—nothing suggestive of carrots or white eye lashes, nor of the setting sun, but red hair, such as one sometimes sees French women with—Oh—Oh—and her skin was cream and roses—Oh—Oh—and she'd a white frock on that had cost fifteen guineas."

"How do you know," said L'Estrange, looking up.

"Oh, I know what women's clothes cost. That frock cost fifteen guineas, and came out of Dover

Street. Gad, she was a clipper! I shall get to know who she is, she must be in the best swim here."

"Perhaps she is married."

"I don't think so, she hadn't a married look. I say, Chickweed old chap, ain't you going to change?"

"Yes, oh yes, I am."

Thus prodded, L'Estrange got out of his undress uniform, and into a suit of gray clothes that were the very counterpart of Valentine's. Then, with a cigarette apiece they set off for the town together.

Now, L'Estrange had taken the precaution to slip the note from 7 Little Ogledal into his breast pocket, and having reached the town, he decided, while listening to Valentine's chatter, that he would certainly go and call upon the writer.

"She may bowl me out," his thoughts ran. "If she does, I must just own up. On the other hand, she may not. Yes, I'll go and call, and I'll say to the servant, 'Does Mrs. Charteris live here?' and if she says 'yes,' I shall know I'm on the right track, and if she says 'Miss Charteris,' I shall say, 'yes, yes, of course.' Beg pardon, what did you say, Toddy?"

"Chickweed," said Toddy, solemnly, "your wits are wool gathering. Believe me, old chap, that's a most dangerous thing, that's the way men go off their dots, and get let in and catch chicken-pox and other disagreeable things. I was telling you that that girl I saw yesterday——"

"Oh, damn the girl you saw yesterday," said L'Estrange, impatiently.

"Not at all. She may be my future wife, and I object to a lady who has more than the off chance of becoming my wife being spoken of disrespectfully."

"Shut up," said L'Estrange, "if you keep on rhapsodising over her I shall fall in love with her myself, and then you won't get a look in. So the best thing you can do will be to drop it, Toddy. I say, that's a good pair of horses. They do drive good cattle about here."

"Yes, and they have good looking girls to stick behind them."

L'Estrange laughed good naturedly. "Look here, I'm going in to get a cup of tea. Will you come?"

"Certainly."

They had, by this time, reached the celebrated tea shop which is known in Blankhampton as Bonner's. A happy thought at the sight of the place had occurred to L'Estrange that he might, from an accommodating waitress, find out who lived at 7 Little Ogledal. But he was doomed to disappointment. The girl who waited upon them was very pretty, and made an impression on Valentine, who was only twenty-two, and extremely susceptible.

"I suppose you know everybody who lives in Blankhampton," said L'Estrange, leaning back

and watching the girl as she set out the tea things.

"No, I've only been here a few weeks, and I don't come from Blankhampton."

"So you don't know anyone who lives in Blankhampton? In a shop like this you would very soon know all the principal people in the town."

"Oh, I may," the girl replied, "but while one is in the tea room one does not know half the people who come."

So he had come to a dead end. He couldn't very well, particularly as Valentine was with him, go up to the desk and inquire who lived at 7 Little Ogledal, or if they happened to know a Mrs. or Miss Charteris. No, but at the big hosier's across the road they would be more likely to know who Dick might happen to be. He would go across there if he could get rid of Valentine, and put the question fair and square.

"What are you going to do, Toddy?" he said.

"Mouch," said Toddy.

L'Estrange groaned within himself. There would be no getting rid of the youngster before dinner time.

"Why?" said Toddy, looking up.

"Why what?"

"Why did you ask? Are you doing anything yourself?"

"No, nothing particular. Oh, I want to get some pocket handkerchiefs and socks and things of that kind, and we may as well go into the club and see what that's like."

"Yes, we may as well. I—I hate new quarters, it's so slow till one gets to know people. Not one blessed soul in the place do I know. I believe there's a third or fourth cousin of my mother's living out fifteen miles or so."

"Who's that?"

"Lady Lucifer."

"Oh, you a connection of Lady Lucifer?"

"Yes, I am. She's all right, smart, pretty."

"Oh yes, she's all right. I met her once, but I can't say that I really know her, or pretend that she would be likely to remember me."

"But then she's in town now, I expect, and fifteen miles—I can't go out there for days to come. Oh, it's beastly, not knowing people. I think we ought to send our agents on in advance, and get our engagements filled up as girls get their programmes filled up when they are going to be very late at a dance, and then we should find invitations waiting for us and all that sort of thing."

"Some of us do. I'm going out to dinner to-night."

"The devil you are! Now where are you going to dine?"

"With some people called Charteris."

"Oh! Good name."

"I'm going there to call now."

"Oh, can't you take me?"



“No—not this time. It would look as if you were fishing for an invitation to dinner.”

“Yes, so it would. It would be the truth, too. Well, it’s half-past four—if you are going, you had better go right away. You can tell them, old fellow, that there’s a charming young man in the regiment, and that his name is John Valentine.”

## CHAPTER II

HAVING shaken off John Valentine, L'Estrange turned into the big hosier's on which he had had his eye while Valentine was still with him. There he made some purchases, and having practically declined to open an account, he enquired of the man who served him if he could tell him the way to Little Ogledal. Having received the necessary instructions, he remarked in a very off-hand, casual kind of way, "Is Mr. Charteris a customer of yours?"

"Mr. Charteris—let me see. Yes, yes, he has been here, but I think the gentleman has not been in Blankhampton very long."

"So?" said L'Estrange. "Not a Blankhampton family?"

"No, sir, not one of our old families. Oh no."

"Service?" said L'Estrange, indifferently.

"I should say not, sir, from his appearance."

"Ah! Hunting, perhaps?"

"Maybe, sir, next winter, but I can't say that he gives me that idea."

Evidently there was nothing to be learned from this source, so L'Estrange did not press the question further, and betook himself away. He followed the directions given for finding Little

Ogledal. It was a narrow deserted street which gave him, somehow, a sensation of Quakers—why, it was impossible to say. The houses looked so prim, they were so solid, not a door was open, there was nothing so frivolous as glass panels to be seen. He could only think of some forbidden sect lurking behind those highly polished brass plates, and peeping occasionally out of the very few windows which looked on to the street. It was a cobbled street, too, round, uncompromising cobbles, washed white, and with irreproachable gutters. No. 7 was a tiny house to all outward appearance. There was a gateway which led into a tiny flagged sort of courtyard, and in this, set sideways, was a massive door of grained oak. It had a huge brass knocker and a small brass plate with instructions to ring, and a large, old fashioned bell pull. It was beautifully kept; it looked like the house of people of position, but it was small, evidently, very small, a mere something tucked away between two opulent looking mansions, which towered high above it. Having made these observations, L'Estrange followed the instructions on the little brass plate and knocked and rang. The door was opened by an extremely young man servant—a tall, slim, fair-haired boy, with an engaging manner and a radiant smile. He welcomed L'Estrange with a bow which would have done justice to a Court functionary.

“Mrs. Charteris?” said L'Estrange.

"Miss Charteris is at home, sir."

L'Estrange stepped into the house. The tall young servant prepared to take his hat and stick.

"Your name, sir?"

"Mr. L'Estrange."

The young man gave a comprehensive smile. Evidently he knew that he was dining there that evening.

"This way, sir."

He led the way down a long and rather wide passage, lighted by a window at the end which looked into a green garden. It was furnished as a corridor, with many pictures and trophies. Near to the door was a carved oak table, long and narrow, on which were some huge bowls, evidently used for visiting cards. There was a long and narrow settee covered in saddle bag, and on the floor was laid a very long Eastern rug. Beyond some blue and white Oriental pots which were used for sticks and umbrellas, there was no appearance of its being an entrance hall.

The servant led the way down the corridor, and turned, by an archway hung with thick curtains, to the left, thus enabling L'Estrange to get a good look at the garden, which was spacious and evidently very old. Judge of his surprise, when, instead of finding himself in a very small house, he walked into a large, even imposing hall, in which a huge fire burned upon the hearth, and which was furnished as a cross between a luxurious

sitting room and an equally luxurious smoking room. The servant led the way across this apartment, opened a door, and announced, "Mr. L'Estrange."

L'Estrange, full of curiosity, and by this time, on the tip-toe of expectation, followed. There was an exclamation of surprise, not unmingled with delight, the sound of a book being thrown down and the frou-frou of a woman's silken garments.

"Why, my dear Mr. L'Estrange, I am so pleased to see you, how sweet of you to come down so soon! Charles, bring some tea at once, and let Mr. Charteris know that Mr. L'Estrange is here."

"Mr. Charteris is out, ma'm."

"Very well, Charles. Tea as soon as you can."

Then the door closed softly and the girl stretched out both hands, took L'Estrange's and held them close in a cordial grip of welcome. "When I realised last week that it was your regiment that was coming into Blankhampton, I—I was absolutely overjoyed. Sit down there—yes, I know it is rather late to have a fire, but I am, as you know, a most chilly being, never get sun enough, never get warmth enough. You don't find this room stuffy, do you?"

"Not a bit," said L'Estrange, looking round from the gracious figure of his hostess at the details of the restful and luxurious room. "No, Miss Charteris, I don't think the room is stuffy, I think it's delightful, and I came to thank you for your awfully kind invitation for to-night."

“ You are coming ? ”

“ Oh, yes, I’m coming, and all the rest of the fellows wish they were coming too—at least, some of them do.”

“ No, not to-night, another time. To-night we’ll have you all to ourselves, just to talk over old times, and all the people we used to know, and be homely and comfy and tea gowny—you know.”

Now, that was exactly what L’Estrange did not know. He looked at the girl long and critically, but with no trace of remembrance of any old times, or any past, or of any mutual friends in the days that were gone by. She was a complete stranger to him.

“ That’s awfully kind of you,” he said gratefully. For he was extremely grateful for the very pleasant, though unknown, places into which his lines had fallen. He felt by no means anxious to make all his brother officers free of this charming establishment, and to enrol them among this gracious and elegant young woman’s friends.

“ Pray,” he said, following up his thoughts, “ don’t have an idea that I want you to ask all my brother officers to dine to-night, or any other night; I’d much rather not.”

“ Would you ? Now, why ? ”

“ Well, I’d rather keep this as a sort of Mecca to myself.”

“ Ah, you were always good at flattery,” said Miss Charteris, leaning back in her chair and

looking at L'Estrange with laughter in her eyes and a smile upon her lips.

"Was I?" said L'Estrange, "nobody ever told me that before."

"Oh, nonsense, I've told you so dozens of times."

L'Estrange leant forward, his elbows on his knees. "I never flattered you," he said, feeling that many a true word may be spoken in jest, "I never flattered you, Miss Charteris. Whatever I may have said to you in the past, I meant."

"Ah, that's the truest form of flattery, I take it as it is intended. But do tell me, now—let me see, it's just two years since you spent your long leave in Egypt."

Egypt! He pricked up his ears. He *had* spent a long leave in Egypt two seasons ago.

"We were out there again last winter. Dick likes it. It's so difficult when one is more or less dependent on a brother to find a place that both really care to be in."

"Your brother doesn't hunt, then?"

"Well, he's by way of being a hunting man—you know what that means, never really happy off a horse, and yet the moment the bad weather comes he wants to be off in search of sunshine. And Dick's such a good sort," she added, "I am always so thankful when I can anyhow fall in with his likes and dislikes."

"I'm sure he is," said L'Estrange heartily.

But he had no more remembrance of Dick than he had of the personality of his hostess. "Then what made you come to Blankhampton, or is this your own place?"

"Our own? It's our own furniture, that is, we bought the place as it stands."

"What made you take on with Blankhampton?"

"I don't know. Dick had a fancy for it. He loathes London, as you must have heard him say many times. I never can get him to do more than a few days at a time, he always declares that his head gives out. Well, we couldn't keep on wandering all the year round without some sort of resting place for the soles of our feet, and as we didn't care for either the trouble or the expense of a large country place, and we happened to hear that this was in the market, we—well, we bought it, at least, Dick did. Practically we bought it as it stood, then we had it done up, and we supplemented the furniture there was with all that we had stored away of our own, and between the two, I really think we have made it as comfortable a house as it would be possible to find."

"You like the neighbourhood?"

"Ah, there you touch me on a tender point. Do I like the neighbourhood! Mr. L'Estrange, when I heard you were coming, at least, when I realised that it was your regiment that was just marching into the garrison, I felt as if I were



going to breathe at last. They're very good, but they're a scrap narrow. Heaven knows I'm not a rapid woman, there never was one less so, but—but—there's something about this place that stifles one. For instance, if two of the regular cathedral set were to come in now, I should have to explain you. It's a little cramping when one has been used to a wider life. Then again, there isn't very much to do. Of course, we've only been here a few months, and the wind has been easterly and I've kept to the house a good deal."

"And your brother?"

"Well, he likes it, he says it's a change from anything we've ever done before. And here is Charles with the ever welcome tea. Are you still fond of tea?"

Now, there was no doubt that L'Estrange had more than a liking for that little between meal which is the best abused function of that kind of the present day, but he positively jumped as she uttered the words. She seemed so familiar, so—well, he scarcely knew how to express it, so *au fait* of him and his atmosphere; whereas to him she was an utter stranger.

As Charles put the last part of the little tea table in place, they heard the clanging of the outer bell.

"Are you at home, ma'm?" he asked.

"Am I at home? No, I think not, Charles. We won't be at home, will we, Mr. L'Estrange?"

"Well, just as you like, he returned. He had

no objection to meeting any quantity of people, but at the same time, he was perfectly happy and comfortable without them.

She settled down again into her lounging chair when she had served him with tea.

"Did you ever hear any more of the Adairs?" she asked.

Now, it happened that during his sojourn in Egypt, L'Estrange has been particularly smitten by the lovely young daughter of a certain Lady Adair, a beautiful young creature not yet out of her teens, who had rejoiced in the charming name of Carmine.

"No," he said, "I never saw anything more of them."

"Ah," cried Miss Charteris, "you were terribly smitten in that quarter, weren't you?"

"I was a bit gone," said L'Estrange.

"They declared that she refused you."

"She didn't do that," said L'Estrange, "for, as a matter of fact, I didn't give her the chance. I might have done," he went on ingenuously, "if I had had a little more encouragement, but there was a German Princeling of sorts, Von Zeidel, he was called, who carried everything before him—you remember?"

"Yes, I remember. What a brute he was!"

"Did you think so?"

"Yes, I couldn't stand him at any price."

"You knew him, of course?"

"Oh yes, everybody knew him who happened

to be in Cairo, even those who didn't want to. I say, Mr. L'Estrange, do you remember the day that you and Dick went off on a bit of sport of your own?"

"Which day?"

"Oh, the day when you both disappeared and when you turned up again, you said you had been ratting or something of that kind, and that it was the best day's sport you'd had in your lives."

"Oh, yes, yes," said L'Estrange, who didn't remember a bit.

"Do you remember the day that Fluffy Molyneux got ducked?"

"Yes, yes, of course I do. Fluffy was pretty, wasn't she?"

"No, I never thought so. Dick used to rave about her, but I never could see it. She had such a figure!"

"Ah well, her figure never was her strong point. She was pretty much taken with Von Zeidel, wasn't she?"

"Yes, she was; but I don't think she meant it seriously. She wanted an English title."

"Small blame to her, with all her dollars."

He lingered on until he had only just time to get back to barracks and change for dinner, having talked over dozens of mutual acquaintances, and quite as many mutual incidents of the past. And he had no recollection of ever having seen Miss Charteris before!

### CHAPTER III

L'ESTRANGE felt, somehow, as he sat in the rather dilapidated cab in which he was driven down to Ogledal that evening, as if, the moment he saw Miss Charteris' brother, he would immediately be able to place her in his mental pictures of the past. The clock up in the big square tower of the Parish, as they called the Cathedral in Blankhampton, struck the eight as he alighted at his destination. Charles received him with a beaming smile, and in a few moments he was ushered into the same room in which he had sat with Miss Charteris during the afternoon.

If she had looked well in an ordinary day dress, she looked better in the garment which she had warned him to expect—a tea gown. It was black and soft and filmy, and its extreme simplicity showed off the whiteness of her throat and arms to absolute perfection. Her shining chestnut hair, which had all the glory of reality, was gathered up on the top of her shapely head in a great knot, which allowed a sweep to fall across her white forehead. Her eyes were something between blue and gray, wonderful eyes, and L'Estrange caught himself wondering how it was possible to have known

them well, and yet to have let them slip his memory.

"Oh, you are punctual," she said, as he went into the room, "but there, you always were a most reliable character."

"If *you* think so," said L'Estrange, "then it is worth a little trouble to make one's self punctual and reliable."

"Now, Dick, on the contrary," she said, turning back to the fire again, "is a shocking delinquent in that way. I tell him sometimes, that instead of being an ordinary everyday, twentieth century, prosaic young man, he ought to have been a poet or a painter. As it is, he is absolutely the most inartistic human being who ever drew breath—as you know very well."

Now, L'Estrange did *not* know, but he said nothing, and the next moment the master of the house came into the room. His greeting was as friendly as his sister's had been.

"I'm heartily glad to see you again. Who would have thought when we parted in Cairo that we should meet again in such a quiet and hum-drum spot as Blankhampton?"

"Who indeed," said Dick. "But it's all the better for me."

"I'm glad you think so. I hope we shall see a good lot of each other while you are quartered here."

Then Charles came and announced that dinner

was ready. The dining room was as charming as the drawing room. The table was round and dainty, and L'Estrange settled himself down to pass an extremely pleasant and profitable evening. But he had no recollection of ever having seen Dick Charteris before! No, he could not place him in any way. He was young and tall and fair, unmistakably his sister's brother, but the charm which in her was so characteristic, was in him greatly lacking. I don't think that anybody would have called Dick Charteris charming. Straight of limb, plain and simple in manner, and quite unassuming he was.

L'Estrange gathered from his conversation that he was extremely keen on horses; that he was equally keen on racing; that he meant to hunt with the Blankshire hounds the following winter, but that he was inclined to regard Blankhampton as somewhat of a one horse show.

"All the same," said his sister, at this point, "I shall not be surprised if you don't hunt next winter."

"Well, if I feel the South a-calling, I suppose I shall not. I *want* to hunt next winter, you see, L'Estrange, that's my present intention. We have put in part of one winter in this queer little place, we may find ourselves so homesick for sunshine that we shall have to follow the swallows. But that's as may be. Time will show."

"I'm told," said L'Estrange, "that the hunting here is extremely good."

"Yes, I suppose it is. We came too late for me to think of it for this year. I don't know, but I fancy the principal interest in Blankhampton is Bridge. Now, in a sense, it's such a go-ahead place, everybody gives you the idea of being terribly rapid. I must confess it's been a revelation to me."

"Do you play Bridge?" asked L'Estrange.

"I hate it, as I hate all card games. When I want to gamble, I like to go to Monte Carlo and play with people I know nothing about. As to Lettice, there, I don't believe she knows one card from another."

"I don't," said Lettice, "except when I'm having my fortune told."

From there the conversation took them back to Cairo again, and they discussed many events, and many people, but still no recollection came back to L'Estrange's memory. It seemed to him as if they must have known each other most intimately, and that he had drunk deeply of the waters of Lethe, so that no trace of either had remained with him.

Now, it happened, for some wholly unexplained reason, that the new regiment did not catch on in Blankhampton. For one thing, they had, in their last quarters, been much fêted; for another, it was by way of being a bachelor regiment, and of the two ladies who did exist, one was a great invalid, and the other had a history. The Chief loathed

all forms of entertainment cordially and consistently, and made no concealment of the fact. Whether from these or other reasons, it is hard to say, but certain it is, that Blankhampton did not give the newcomers a very warm welcome, and they did not take on Blankhampton.

John Valentine was eloquent on the subject. "I think," he said, going into L'Estrange's quarters about a week after his first visit to Little Ogledal, "I think I shall send in my papers, Chickweed."

"Send in your papers? What for?"

"What for! I didn't come into the Army to qualify for a housekeeper's place; I came into the Army to have a good time."

"What do you mean, 'qualify for a housekeeper's place?'"

"Three times this week, my dear chap, I've been round inspecting dinners, and taking notes of drains and the cleanliness of stone floors and steps. Distraction in this hole? Why, there ain't any. The only distraction I've had this week was in finding two cobwebs that the last dirty lot left behind them; yes, two cobwebs, and I said to my Sergeant-Major, 'Damn it, Sergeant-Major, those are cobwebs,' and he said, 'Yes, sir, I'm afraid they do look rather like it.' And I said, 'Sergeant-Major, it's given us a new sensation, we'll mention them for a medal, eh?'"

"You shouldn't talk to your Sergeant-Major like that, Toddy."



“ Well, when a poor devil is reduced to making jokes with his Sergeant-Major and his own servant, things are pretty desperate. Gad! I followed a sweet little girl down the street the other day, and followed her into a tea shop, not that big one, but a little one in a side street—oh, very chic, like a Bond Street tea shop. She went in first and I went in afterwards, quite prepared to pay for her tea and all that sort of thing, and I’m shot if there wasn’t a chap waiting for her, bounced off his chair like a parched pea on a hot shovel—had a sort of little Grabby look about him. ‘ You’re awfully late, dear,’ said he. ‘ Yes, Jack, I am late. I’m very sorry, but I couldn’t help it.’ I couldn’t help it, either,” John Valentine went on, “ I had to order tea and drink it, too, and that couple disappeared into an inner apartment—just where I wanted to be, by Jove! ”

“ Who were they? ” asked L’Estrange.

“ Oh, I don’t know—don’t care.”

“ But I thought she was pretty? ”

“ Yes, she was pretty, but she wasn’t for me, so what was the use of bothering about her any more.”

“ Poor Toddy! Life’s very hard,” said L’Estrange, in quite a serious voice.

“ Hard! ” echoed the boy. “ Oh yes, very hard for you. You went out to dinner the first night you were here. What were the people called? ”

“ Oh, the people I dined with? Charteris.”

“ Charteris! Know them before? ”

" Yes."

" Where? "

" At Cairo."

" At Cairo! Fancy having the luck to come across people you've known in Cairo. I hate this place."

" Oh, new quarters are always horrid," said L'Estrange, easily.

" They are, you're quite right. I was happy and contented and satisfied where I was. I didn't want anything new, I didn't want the grind and fag of a beastly march, I wanted to be left in peace."

" Yes, but that didn't suit the book of the Government. You didn't go into the Army to pick up young ladies in tea shops, you didn't go into the Army to dine with old friends, or, for the matter of that, with new ones. You went into the Army, my friend, to learn to be a first class soldier."

" Damn! " said John Valentine, with feeling.

" Yes, yes, of course, a great deal of it is damn, but still, new quarters are always the same, you don't know anyone, nobody knows you, life is very dull until you get into the swim."

For a moment the boy did not speak. " Who are the Charteris' ? " he asked presently.

" Who are they? They're the Charteris'. They don't belong to this place at all."

" Oh, really! Are there any girls? "

"No, there aren't any girls. There's Miss Charteris and her brother."

"Young?"

"Yes, three or four and twenty."

"Miss Charteris?"

"Yes, I suppose Miss Charteris is four and twenty."

"And the brother?"

"A little older."

"You might take me to see them," said John Valentine.

"Yes, I might," said L'Estrange in a tone of non-committal.

"Well, will you?"

"I must ask the lady first."

"Oh, oh, she's that kind of lady, is she?"

"Very much that kind of lady," said L'Estrange, whose tone was not untinged by offence.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, old chap," said John Valentine, "a thousand apologies. Some ladies are so awfully lax nowadays, and some are so awfully particular, it takes one all one's time to steer between the two. Seriously, though, Chickweed, it's a very dree business being stranded in quarters of this kind, and I should be grateful if you'd take me to call on Miss Charteris."

"All right," said he, "I'll talk to her about it."

"Now, I wonder," said John Valentine to himself as he watched L'Estrange go swinging

away across the barrack yard, "I wonder whether Chickweed's been taken in and done for, whether he means to keep this choice morsel to himself. I haven't seen anybody in Blankhampton who's worth a second thought, and everybody who knew I was coming to Blankhampton said, 'Toddy, you're in luck, my boy, the Blankhampton girls are the prettiest girls on earth.' Pretty! I've only seen one worth calling pretty—at least, about one." For a vivid remembrance came to him of the girl he had seen during his first walk down St. Thomas Street. How long ago it seemed, that day, and by Jove! how pretty she was! What an air she had, how unlike the common herd she was, how—oh well, it wasn't worth thinking about, she *was*, that settled it. Now at that moment Toddy Valentine was almost of a mind to persuade himself that he had seen no girl of flesh and blood to so strike his admiration, but that it was some fancy conjured up by his own vivid imagination.

"I wonder what game old Chickweed is playing! I wonder if that was the meaning of his being so changed when he came back from Cairo. I haven't forgotten how everybody in the regiment was talking about it. They all said, and I remember it well because I was a youngster at the time, they all said, 'By Jove, old Chickweed's fallen in love at last.' And Chickweed went on and made no sign. Can this be the girl? I wonder! It's very plain to me," John Valentine's thoughts ran,

as he stood looking at the place where L'Estrange had been, "very plain to me that Chickweed wants to keep that girl to himself. Now, that isn't fair, no, hang me, it's not fair. I shall make it my business to get to know her, I shall consider myself perfectly justified in moving heaven and earth to get to know her. But how? Not one soul in this God-forgotten place do I know, not one blessed soul outside these barracks. But that's neither here nor there. Rome wasn't built in a day, and if I can't get to know a fair lady, any fair lady, within a week—why, I deserve hanging. Oh, but Chickweed is a deep one, very good natured, very suave, always smooth and friendly—will listen to your yarns and give you good advice, but himself—wax, close as wax."

"Hullo, Toddy, what are you mumbling about? Got 'em again?"

"No," said Toddy, cheerfully, turning round, "I don't think I've got 'em this time, but I'm puzzled, and I don't like being puzzled, it's so beastly irritating."

"What's puzzling you, my friend?" said the new comer.

"Nothing much," replied Toddy, "only I can't make Chickweed out."

"Chickweed! Ah, there's much more in Chickweed than most people have any idea of. He's a chap who doesn't talk much, and some people

think because a chap isn't always on the spout that he's a sort of imbecile who don't know how many beans make five. Chickweed knows right enough—damn sight more than he chooses to tell."

"That's just it," said John Valentine, ruefully.

## CHAPTER IV

AFTER this, Fortune was very kind to John Valentine, for a few minutes later, when he was back in the ante-room, pretending to read a newspaper, and wondering how he could get the entrée to the Charteris establishment, a mess waiter came in and announced the very name which was in his thoughts.

He made much of Dick Charteris, offered him a glass of sherry, which he declined, a cigarette, which he accepted, took him out to see his horses, and then suggested that he should go up to his quarters and have tea. In return, Dick Charteris suggested that instead of going up to his quarters to have tea, he should walk down into the town and make his sister's acquaintance.

"She's pretty sure to be in to-day," he said, "for at lunch she told me she didn't think she should go out. I don't know why, she's not ill, but women are like that, you know, you never know what they're up to, even when it's your own sister."

The name of L'Estrange flashed into John Valentine's mind, but like B'rer Rabbit, he lay low and said nothing.

In the end, the two men left the Barracks, and walked down to the town together.

"I haven't the least idea what part of Blankhampton you live in."

"Oh, we live up near the Parish," said Charteris easily. "Rum idea to call the Cathedral the Parish, ain't it? Yes, but those old Cathedral Johnnies, they had a very tidy idea of fixing themselves up. Now, for instance, we've got no approach, no outward appearance, but the house is a gem."

"Is the house your own, or have you just taken it for a time—hunting, and so on?"

"No, we took the lease of it, the usual seven, fourteen or twenty-one, and we took over a certain amount of furniture—as it stood, in fact, and we added all sorts of things that we had stored up of our own. And Lettice, my sister, you know, is always adding to things, she has a bit of a fancy that way."

Lettice! So that was her name, Lettice Charteris—and a ripping good name too! Oh, he felt he was stealing a march on old Chickweed.

They were soon at their destination, and went, side by side down the narrow, old-world street, between the large, Quaker-like houses, until they came to that which bore the number 7.

"You see," said Charteris, "it's just a scrap of wall with a door in it, might be anything or nothing. Ah, believe me, those Cathedral John-



nies knew what was what when they planned out these quaint corners. Miss Charteris at home, Charles? ”

“ Yes, sir,” said Charles genially, as he took their hats and sticks. “ I’ve just served tea to Miss Charteris in the drawing-room.”

“ Oh, well, I daresay you’ll have to bring some more.”

“ Yes, sir, in two minutes,” said Charles, with his own beaming smile.

Then Dick Charteris led the way down the corridor and across the luxurious hall, and preceded his guest into the large old-fashioned drawing-room.

“ Lettice,” he said, “ I’ve brought Mr. Valentine, to have some tea. This is my sister, Valentine.”

“ Why, that’s awfully nice. I was feeling not a little dull and ever so lonely. Sit in that chair, Mr. Valentine, I’m so pleased to see you. How do you find Blankhampton? ”

“ Dull,” said John Valentine. “ At least, I did until this afternoon.”

His tone was ingenuous, and its very frankness made it a compliment in itself.

“ Ah, that was what we felt. We did bring letters of introduction, any amount of them, and we quite intended when we came here, to do our duty to the uttermost farthing. But, somehow, I was busy in the house, I wanted to make a little

nest, such as I had never had before, and Dick was worrying about horses—and there they are in my desk, half-a-dozen of them. I can't send them now, can I?"

"Oh, yes," said John Valentine, "if the people are worth knowing."

"Oh, there are plenty of people worth knowing," said Lettice; "there's Lady Lucifer——"

"Oh, she's a sort of cousin of mine."

"Really! Is she nice? I know she's very smart."

"Oh, she's all right," said John Valentine, with the easy contempt with which most men speak of women with whom they are connected by family ties, "fairly amusin', dresses well, smart and all that, big position—oh, she's all right. I haven't seen her since I came, I expect she's in town."

"But you'll go and see her?"

"Oh, yes, I'll go and see her, of course; my mother would be awfully upset if I didn't go, but it's no use going when she's up in London."

His tone implied that Lady Lucifer would keep. Then he easily turned the conversation to his comrade Chickweed.

"You know L'Estrange of Ours, don't you, Miss Charteris?"

"Mr. L'Estrange? Oh, yes, yes."

At this point, Dick Charteris, with a word of apology, betook himself away, leaving his sister and the visitor alone.

"A good old sort, L'Estrange," said John Valentine; "oh yes, very popular in the regiment, everybody likes him—never heard of anybody who didn't. You knew him out in Cairo, didn't you?"

"Oh yes, very well," said Miss Charteris, "very well indeed. Both Dick and I were awfully glad when we heard that his regiment was coming to Blankhampton, because we don't know many people—we've not been here long, as I told you—and an old friend——"

"And an old friend so interested in you."

"I don't know that he is."

"Oh, I quite thought he was. He never was the same, you know, after he went to Cairo."

Miss Charteris laughed outright. "Really? But that wasn't anything to do with me; I wasn't that particular cause of effect."

"Oh, weren't you?"

"No, I wasn't; that was somebody quite different. Oh, there's nothing of that kind between Mr. L'Estrange and me, our friendship was quite a prosaic, hum-drum, matter-of-fact sort of business—as it is now."

"You don't say so! Oh, I quite thought that—that—oh well, I suppose I ought not to talk about L'Estrange's private affairs. I apologise to him, and to you, too, Miss Charteris. Do you know, I'm awfully glad to get to know you? I wanted Chickweed to bring me, but he wouldn't bite."

"Chickweed! Why do you call him Chickweed?"

"Oh, I don't know—perhaps because he isn't much like chickweed."

"What do they call you?"

"'The Nuisance,' I believe," said John Valentine, with a gay laugh.

"Because you're not a nuisance?" said Miss Charteris.

"Well, I like to think I'm not; I hope you don't find me so?"

"Not at all."

"Because I may run the risk of becoming one, Miss Charteris," he went on, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and looking at her with a serious earnest young face; "I'm awfully lonely in Blankhampton."

"Are you? I thought gay young subalterns were never lonely anywhere."

"No, I believe they're not in Cairo, where you've seen gay young ensigns and things. Somehow, I don't know why, but men in line regiments seem to fall on their feet easier than we do. Now, I was perfectly happy in our last quarters, the people were nice and kind and hospitable, there were several houses where I was perfectly free to go in and out as I liked without people or talking or thinking about anything but pure friendliness. Now, those are the sort of

people that men in my circumstances require to know, people who are kind and friendly."

"I understand," said Miss Charteris; "you want me to say, 'Dear Mr. Valentine, this house is at your disposition; come to breakfast if it please you, come to lunch if it please you, and, well—this house is at your disposition.'"

"Yes, I do want you to say it, I want you to say it awfully badly. I don't feel I'm going to meet a lot of people, I don't feel I'm going to like 'em when I do. As I was saying to Chickweed, I didn't come into the Army to grind, I came into the Army to have a good time, and I can't enjoy myself if I haven't some good houses to go to."

"Well, Mr. Valentine, number seven Little Ogledal is at your disposition. But you must take it as you find it. If I am going out to a tea party, or a Dorcas meeting, or to enquire the character of a servant, or do a little shopping, or to make formal calls, or any other feminine occupations of the kind, you must put up with Dick when he's at home, or with your own company, if you care to stay by yourself, if he isn't. But free of the house I make you."

"Now, that's awfully good of you," said he, "that's really awfully good of you. You—you won't mind me taking you at your word?"

"I never give those invitations unless I mean them. I haven't given such an invitation since I came to Blankhampton."

"Not even L'Estrange?"

"Ah, Mr. L'Estrange, that is different. You see, I knew him in Cairo, and in Cairo one gets very intimate. As a matter of fact, I never have given him any such invitation, but I have acted as if it were his without the trouble of telling him so. But you two are great friends, I know you are because he has told me so; he has spoken of you to me more than once."

"Oh, yes, yes, Chickweed is quite my best pal, quite my greatest friend in the regiment. But, I say, Miss Charteris, you don't go to Dorcas meetings, do you?"

"Of course I don't. I daresay I should if I made myself one with the place, they are sure to have Dorcas meetings, all parishes have that sort of thing. I do know some people here, of course, various people just round have called on me, and the Deanery people came to see me too, but somehow, I haven't grown really intimate with anybody. They seem to think it odd that Dick and I should want to have a house like this, should want to have a home. They think that it's rather queer that I haven't got a watch-dog to keep me continual company. Now, Dick is four years older than I am, I am three and twenty, but I might be three and thirty from my capacity for taking care of myself. I've been everywhere, lived everywhere, seen everything, done everything. You see, Dick was left my guardian when he was just one and twenty. I

didn't see having a watch-dog. I had learned everything a girl could learn in the convent where I was educated. I speak French and German as I speak English, and I can sew and darn and mend and make, if need be; I've a tidy idea of cooking and I know a good deal about gardening."

"Do you?"

"Of course I do. My dear Mr. Valentine, I can wash up dishes as well as any cook, they teach girls those things at a convent. Girls of the highest class and the poorest class who attend the same school are absolutely equal and they are taught everything according to their capacities. I was good at languages, but I'm no good at music, I don't know one note from another. I don't know anything about cards, I can't play Bridge, but I had to take it in turn to *marché*, I had to take it in turn to help the good sisters get up their *cornettes*. So, you see, I learned something of everything, and when Dick was left my guardian just after I had passed my seventeenth birthday, it never occurred to either of us that a third person was necessary to look after me."

"And you travelled?"

"Yes. You see, my father had lived in France for a long time and we never thought of going to England. We neither of us knew much about England—well, I must say Dick knew more than I did, I had hardly ever been there. So, when we were free, we went down to the South and we

spent all that winter in a little villa in a village between Nice and Monte Carlo."

"You had a gay time?" said John Valentine, with a vivid remembrance of his own pilgrimages between Nice and Monte Carlo.

"I don't think we had; no, I hardly ever went to the Casino at either place. You see, I didn't know the world at all. I had a little villa, a charming garden, a couple of nice French servants, and a gardener who managed everything outside. We lived very quietly and made many excursions into the country, and Dick had a little yacht, a very modest affair, and we would go for trips up and down the coast. Then the weather got hot and we went up into the mountains and lived in a little inn, very simple and primitive, but we were happy enough. Then, when we had had a second winter there, we felt we'd had enough of that part of the Riviera, and we went further on and saw more of life, began to take an interest in Paris, went to Italy, taking Switzerland on our way, then down in Sicily, and right up the Mediterranean to Athens and Constantinople. And then we came to London. We put in that winter in the Shires, we hunted hard, both of us. Then I had a nasty spill that almost did for me."

"After that?" said John Valentine.

"I think," she said, simply, "that my nerve went, for I never hunted again. We didn't go back to the Shires when the autumn came, but sold all our hunters. I hated living in somebody else's



house, I wasn't used to English ways, I wasn't used to English servants. We went back to Continental life again. We went to India that winter, yes, we did it all. No, I didn't care for it, didn't like it at all. But Cairo was quite different."

## CHAPTER V

WHEN John Valentine went away from his first visit to 7 Little Ogledal, Lettice Charteris gave him an invitation.

“ Dick and I are going out to-night. We are dining at the Golden Swan with an old friend of Dick’s who is passing through Blankhampton, but come and dine with us to-morrow at eight o’clock. Mr. L’Estrange is coming.”

“ I shall love to,” said John Valentine, promptly.

He was feeling very pleased with himself when he went back to barracks, and as he had a good half hour to spare before he need think of dressing for mess, he sat himself down in his biggest armchair to think things over with the help of his most trusty pipe.

By Jove, how charming she was, his thoughts ran, what style! So easy, fresh and unconventional, and yet nothing fast or rapid or loud about her. All was so genuine, the chestnut glory of her hair so real, so unartificial—her great lovely eyes—“ Ugh!” he muttered to himself, “ I don’t wonder that old Chickweed wanted to keep her to himself.”

Oddly enough, that evening he found himself next to L'Estrange at dinner.

"Well, my friend," said L'Estrange, "what have you been up to?"

"Oh, out and about,"

"Still railing at Blankhampton?"

"No, don't think it's half a bad sort of place," said Valentine.

"Oh, don't you?" L'Estrange turned and looked at him searchingly. "Why, what's happened? You were full of grumblings and complainings only as far back as lunch time."

John Valentine laughed. "Ah yes, I did feel rather bad. You see—fact is—I didn't know anybody."

"Oh, and who do you know now?"

"Oh, I've been down to see your Miss Charteris this afternoon."

"The devil you have! How did you get there?"

"Well, I walked—quite in the usual way, on my two feet."

"But how did you get to know her?"

"Well, you see, it was like this, the brother chap came to call, and I happened to be here—and in the end he took me down to make his sister's acquaintance. They're very old friends of yours, ain't they, Chickweed?"

"I knew them in Cairo," said L'Estrange.

"So she told me. She's a charming girl."

"Oh, very charming."

"Nice house."

"Very."

"You wanted to keep it to yourself, didn't you?"

"Not a bit of it."

"She's asked me to dine there to-morrow night."

"Has she? Well, I'm glad of that," said L'Estrange pleasantly.

"So am I," said John Valentine, heartily. "Did you know them very well in Cairo?"

"Not very well," said L'Estrange.

"Oh, she spoke so very intimately of you."

"Ah well, one soon makes friends in a place like that. I wasn't in love with her, if that's what you mean?"

"No—so she told me."

"Did she though?"

"We all knew, of course, that you were interested in Cairo—in someone in Cairo," said John Valentine, who was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery if he could, and yet was a little diffident on broaching the subject with a man some years his senior.

"Oh—did you? Well, it wasn't Miss Charteris."

"So she told me."

"Oh! And pray, did she tell you anything more about me?"

"No, she didn't tell me who it was—I didn't

ask her. I don't know that I particularly want to know, Chickweed, because it ain't any business of mine—so long as it's not Miss Charteris herself——”

“Not taken in and done for already?”

“No, not taken in and done for at all, only, if I thought you were going seriously in that quarter, I would restrain my admiration,” said John Valentine.

“Now, that's very good of you, John,” said L'Estrange, quite seriously. “I'll not forget it, old chap.”

Now, as a matter of fact, the more L'Estrange thought about Lettice Charteris and her brother, the less did he manage to connect them with Cairo.

“It ought to have come back to me by this time,” he remarked solemnly to himself just before he turned in that night, “but it doesn't, somehow. I don't connect either of them with Cairo, I've no recollection—and yet I know I've seen her before, I know I've seen him before, but they don't seem to fit in with any remembrance I have of Cairo or Egypt. I wonder if I've got anything wrong with my brain. By Jove, I'll go to town and see Dillory! Nothing like going to a first class specialist if there's anything wrong with you. The idea of knowing a girl like that, young, beautiful, charming, well off, and yet that she should have been blotted completely out of my brain. I'll go and see Dillory next week.”

He was as good as his word, and did pay a visit to the celebrated physician who held the keys of about half the secret cupboards in the upper classes of English society. But Dr. Dillory told him nothing which would in any way confirm his suspicion.

"I wish all the brains that come here to consult me were as clear as yours. What makes you think there's anything wrong? It's unusual in a man of your age."

"Well," said L'Estrange, "I'll make a clean breast of it. I am quartered down in Blankhampton now, and there I renewed an acquaintance with a brother and sister; it seems I knew them in Cairo two years ago. Now, two years is not very long. The brother one might forget, but the sister is young, charming, fascinating. Now, while she knows me very well, I have no recollection of her, and it seems to me, Doctor," he went on in his wisest tones, "it seems to me that there must be something seriously wrong with the brain of a man of my age who can entirely forget such an acquaintance."

"You're—you are thinking of marrying?"

"Oh, no, nothing of that kind, nothing of that kind could ever come of it, but there's something wrong about it. Now, Doctor, confess, if it happened to yourself, you would feel the same, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, no. I daresay it might easily be ex-

plained. At all events, there's nothing wrong with your brain, you're perfectly sound in mind and body. I'm willing to write a certificate, if you like."

"Thank you, Doctor, that's all I want. I don't believe," said L'Estrange, "in letting an idea of that kind get hold of you. It may be silly to have it, but at the same time, go to a first class man, and get an expert opinion."

"Yes, I think you're wise. All the same, there's no foundation for your idea whatsoever."

He spent the rest of his few hours' leave very profitably in town, which was very gay just then, and went back to Blankhampton, happy and satisfied as to himself, more puzzled than ever as to the past.

He found that John Valentine had not allowed the grass to grow under his feet. Already he was on terms of extreme intimacy with the establishment at 7 Little Ogledal. It happened the day after his return from town that the two young men walked down to see Miss Charteris together. He realised as soon as the door was opened that John Valentine had absolutely cut him out with the entire establishment. His intimacy began with Charles, who received him with a smile of which L'Estrange did not think even he was capable. When he threw open the door of the drawing-room he announced them in important accents which told both the men that Miss Charteris had visitors with

her. Yes, there were several ladies sitting in the pleasant room, and to these they were promptly presented.

"Let me introduce you to Mrs. Waring, Mr. L'Estrange," said Miss Charteris.

"I am Mrs. David Waring," said that lady, smoothly.

"Yes, Mrs. David Waring. I'm so sorry, you see, I've not yet learned the proper ramifications of the different Blankhampton families."

"There are not so many Blankhampton families now," said Mrs. David Waring, in wholly unemotional tones. "I fancy the Warings are as old and have been here as long as anyone."

"Oh, then you're not Blankhampton born?"

"I was not born in Blankhampton itself. I am a Blankshire woman and my husband's people have been here for seven or eight generations. Oh, there are others in the town who have been here as long, or almost as long as they have; your next door neighbour, Miss Charteris, is of a very old Blankhampton family."

"And her name?"

"Well, the name is De Lisle—Mr. and Mrs. De Lisle, and several sons and daughters. They are——"

At this point the handsome girl who was sitting not far from Mrs. David Waring laughed outright.

"Ah, I always tell my mother," she said in a cool clear voice, "that the De Lises are her adoration."



“Not at all, Miriam, not at all. I respect them, as everybody in Blankhampton respects them; I like them, as everybody in Blankhampton likes them. They are thoroughly good, charitable, kind hearted people. You know perfectly well, your father always says the word of a De Lisle is better than the bond of most people.”

“I’m sure,” broke in Lettice Charteris, hurriedly, “I’m sure they are delightful people. I only hope that I may come to know them in time. Mr. Valentine, let me introduce you to Miss Waring.”

“Miss Miriam Waring,” put in the elder lady.

“Ah yes, Miss Miriam Waring—I—I am a little at sea as yet.”

There were two other ladies there to whom the two men were strangers, and of whom no identification was offered.

Miss Charteris laid herself out to be agreeable, and to pay equal attention to all in a way which showed she was thoroughly accustomed to the management of society. And they talked and talked and had tea, and stayed quite a long time chatting, until Mrs. David Waring upheaved herself with a silken sigh.

“Well, my dear Miss Charteris, I have paid you quite a long visitation.”

“Oh, not at all.”

“Oh yes, quite a visitation, but I hope when you come to see me at number sixteen, you will bring

your brother and dine. We are plain homely people, I cannot give great crushes, they upset my husband. We generally ask our friends to join us at dinner, nothing gives him greater pleasure than to see the table full."

"We should love to come," said Miss Charteris, in a tone of apparent sincerity.

"I hope that my son will make the acquaintance of your brother, and you and Miriam are so near of an age, and such near neighbours, that it should be very pleasant for you both. I will write and fix a day as soon as I know what my husband's engagements are. Good afternoon, good afternoon."

"Good-bye," said Lettice Charteris.

She just looked round the door to see if the faithful Charles was in attendance, then she came back to the group by the fire.

"I call it very friendly to come and see one in that nice neighbourly way," she said as she seated herself.

"Oh, pray be under no misapprehension, Blankhampton is not very friendly," said one of her visitors, the one who was sitting next to her.

"Oh, is that so?"

"Oh, no, quite the contrary. I've seen people come to Blankhampton and settle down here without getting to know a soul."

"But why did anybody call upon us, I wonder?"

"Ah well, they've seen you on Sunday mornings

at the Parish. It's just like that, some people get on and some people don't."

"I never thought of anybody calling without letters of introduction or anything of that kind. I did bring letters of introduction, but I have never presented them."

"By the way," said John Valentine, "I've just had a note from my cousin Lady Lucifer. Lucifer can't get on in town, they're down here for a few days' fresh air. I shall go over there one day this week. I shall tell Violet to come in and call on you."

"Oh, I should be delighted," said Lettice, with frank delight, "I have heard so much about Lady Lucifer from various mutual friends. I know ever so many people who know her."

"Oh, do you? Then that's all right. I'll tell her she had better come and call on you at once."

The young man spoke with the easy familiarity, not to say contempt, that most people have for their relations, and the two ladies who were calling were duly impressed, as perhaps they would have been impressed by nothing but the magic name of Lucifer.

## CHAPTER VI

THAT afternoon, when her visitors had gone, Lettice Charteris sat before the glowing fire thinking deeply. She had told John Valentine that she had been everywhere and done everything, yet in her heart that afternoon she knew that although she had only spoken in a general sense, she had not spoken quite correctly. And the remembrance of her own words came back to her in that quiet hour.

"I didn't say it for deception," she told herself, "I was speaking more as a *façon de parler*, and yet the idle words conveyed something that was not true. I never felt it so strongly as to-day, there are so many things I haven't done, so many places where I have never been. I feel somehow as if I'm going to do them now; I feel somehow as I have never felt before, that life is going to turn out quite different to what it has been; yes, quite different. I'm glad we came to Blankhampton; yes, I don't think I shall ever regret it."

She looked up with a start.

"Oh, is that you, Dick? Was I talking to myself?"

"I don't think so, old girl," said Dick cheer-

fully. "All alone? I thought you had visitors."

"Yes, I have had visitors, I have had no end of people. We're going to catch on here, Dick, it's going to be a success, this place."

She was lying back in the depths of a very cosy chair, and she looked up at him with an expression of pitiful yearning in her eyes.

"My dear old girl," he said with that queer, rough man's sympathy which has something of brusqueness about it, "for your sake, I hope to God it will. It was a big step to buy this place—it might have turned out a frost, it *would* have if it had depended upon me," and stooping, he brought his hand down on her shoulder, and stood looking at her intently. "You like that youngster?" he asked presently with a change of tone.

"Yes, yes, I like him, he's all right, he believes in me. The other—he can't remember, can't put a name to it. He tries and puzzles all the time; I see it in his eyes. Over and over again the same idea rises up—'Where have I seen you before? Where did we meet? How did we meet? How is it I don't remember?' He doesn't like to put it into plain English, but it's there in plain English in his eyes all the time."

"Never mind, he has a bad memory; it isn't worth thinking of."

"I know it, I know it perfectly well. Oh, Dick, when I look back into the past; all I went through, all I suffered, the humiliation, the torture, the

shame! And you came and took me out of it. Oh, Dick, what should I have done if you hadn't taken me out of it?"

"I wouldn't think about it, old lady. It's bad enough to have lived through it, why live through it again?"

"Why indeed, why? You are right, Dick, I won't live through it again. I'll—I'll never think of it again, or speak of it again. After all, what's the good? I feel somehow, Dick, that life's going to be altogether a different scheme; I have such a sense of security here—this quaint old house that looks as if it had belonged to our great grandfather, this quaint still little town; there seldom seems to be anything going on, and yet it seems like Paradise."

"What's the good of looking at it in that way? The past is past and gone and done with; don't torture yourself by recalling what can never come into your life again. Come, go and get dressed for dinner. There's nobody coming, is there?"

"No. That nice boy fished hard to be asked, but I was adamant. I felt that I wanted to talk things over with you, to tell you about my visitors—such respectable visitors!"

"That's all right," said Dick easily, "I knew they'd come in time. You'll be all right, old girl, and as respectable as even you can wish—that is, if you can stick the dullness of it all."

"I love it," said Lettice in a tone that was

almost pitiful, "and the duller it is, the better I like it. It's such a contrast to—all the rest. Dullness is safe, Dick, eminently safe."

Meantime John Valentine and L'Estrange had gone back to barracks together. Once across the barrack square, however, they separated, L'Estrange going to the ante-room and John Valentine to his own quarters. Arrived in that haven, he seated himself in his favourite chair, and having lighted his pipe, he drew a writing pad towards him.

"My dear Violet," he began, "I shall be delighted to come out to dinner to-morrow evening, and stay the night if possible. Awfully glad to see you and Lucifer again. Your affectionate cousin, John Valentine."

"I must see that Violet calls on her," said he as he affixed a stamp to the letter. "After all, cousins have their uses, and Violet Lucifer isn't a bad sort; and Lucifer, on his native heath, so to speak, should be a distinctly useful quantity."

When John Valentine arrived at Matcham, he found that the Lucifers had brought quite a large party down from town with them, so it was not easy for him to get any conversation of a private nature with his hostess, cousin though she was. He was leaving early the following morning, much earlier than it was likely that Lady Lucifer would be up, and at last, in desperation, he told her that he was most anxious for five minutes' conversation with her.

"Why, surely," she said, "let us go into my own little room. It's so difficult to get a talk with anybody when the house is full, isn't it? Now, what do you want?"

"I want you to do something for me, Violet," he said as they went across the hall together in the direction of the boudoir.

"Well, my dear John, I'll do it if it's in my power."

"Oh, it's in your power. The question is, will you do it?"

"Well, what is it?"

"I want you to go and call on a lady in Blankhampton."

"In Blankhampton!" Her tone was doubtful. "Oh, one of your ladies, John? Is there anything against her?"

"Anything against her!" he said in disgusted accents. "I might want to do a poor little woman a good turn if I thought she'd been ill-used by Fate, but not to let my own people in over it—oh no! And this lady, so far from being undesirable, is most desirable in every way."

"Then how is it," said Lady Lucifer, "that I do not know her already?"

"Because she has only just come with her brother to settle in Blankhampton. They've bought a house near the Cathedral—the Parish they call it, don't they?—and I want you to go and see them."



"What is their name?"

"Charteris."

"A good name," said Lady Lucifer.

"Oh, the name suits the owner. Lettice Charteris her name is. She has lived a great deal abroad. L'Estrange knew them in Egypt."

"Young?"

"Yes, two or three and twenty. The brother is three or four years older."

"Does he do anything?"

"Oh no, they've plenty of money. They've bought the house they live in; they live in very good style—the Deanery people have called on her and some others—I've seen 'em there, but she's not the sort of girl to know all and sundry, she's the sort of girl who ought to be in the very best swim in the place."

"She ought to have brought letters of introduction if she wanted that sort of thing."

"She *has* brought letters of introduction, she's brought one to you, she hasn't presented it because she knew you were in London. She's a charming girl."

"You hard hit, John?"

"Yes, I am," he said sturdily, "and you are the only one of my people who is in the neighbourhood, and—I should like you to see her."

"All right, John," said she, putting out her hand, and just touched his, "I'll go in and see her to-morrow if I can. You're—you're sure she's all right?"

"Don't I tell you that she's brought a letter of introduction to you from someone or other?"

"Yes, so you did. Well, I'll go in to-morrow or the next day at latest. By the bye, you know we're going to stay down here for a fortnight. Poor Lucifer gets so frightfully bored in town. He's so awfully good about staying there to please me that I feel it's a very small sop to give him a fortnight at Matcham. And I'm very fond of Matcham," she added after a moment's pause. "I should give up London altogether, Lucifer does hate it so, but when one has girls to think of it is impossible to throw over all one's social obligations. And really Joan is getting so tall and coming on so fast, I feel I must think of her future."

"She's awfully pretty, too," said John Valentine.

"I am glad to say my children are all pretty. I like to think I have started them well in the matter of looks, but looks are not everything, by any means. So I have to be stern and make poor Lucifer do the grind of London till his soul is sick. He gets out and about all he can, plays golf three times a week, takes a turn at polo, fences every morning, rides daily, and if he has time, does a spell on a bicycle. He says he's getting soft, but I don't see how he very well can be. Really his season consists of dinner engagements and occasional evening shows, that's all."

“A very good all, too,” said John Valentine. “I wish I could have a turn in London. Do you know, Violet, I’m about sick of the Army, it’s such a grind; it’s such a grind to no purpose, one is always tied down to more or less beastly country quarters.”

“But you occasionally meet with Miss Charteris’?”

“Yes, I’ve once met with Miss Charteris’—that is to say, I’ve met Miss Charteris herself—never another.”

“Ah, but you don’t know many people in Blankhampton yet. Of course, in Blankhampton proper there are not many people in our set, but the society round about is extremely good.” She rose up as she spoke. “Well then, John, I’ll go in and call on your divinity at once.”

“And you’ll ask her out here?”

“Of course—barring I should take any rooted dislike to her.”

“You won’t do that,” said he.

So the following afternoon Lady Lucifer announced that she had to go into Blankhampton, and all her guests having arranged their movements till dinner time, she set off for the city, driving herself in the smartest of park phaetons. To the house in Little Ogledal she went first; it was then a few minutes after four o’clock.

Now, one of Lady Lucifer’s characteristics was that she never forgot a face which had once

impressed itself upon her memory, and the moment that Charles opened the door she recognized him.

"Oh Charles, are you living here now?"

"Yes, my lady, good morning, my lady. Your ladyship is well?" he enquired with his most ingratiating smile.

"Ah, I wondered what got you when Lady Pamela died," said Lady Lucifer kindly. She was too great a lady to pretend she had no acquaintance with Charles.

"I came to Mr. and Miss Charteris as soon as I was set free from her ladyship," said Charles.

"I see. Well, I'm glad to know where you are. Is Miss Charteris at home?"

"Yes, my lady, Miss Charteris is at home. Will you come this way."

He led the way across the hall and showed her into the drawing-room.

"I think, my lady, Miss Charteris is upstairs," he said, as he left her alone.

Lady Lucifer looked round the large and pleasant room.

"Nice room," her thoughts ran, "good taste—looks as if it had belonged to their grandfather, but there isn't a photograph in the place."

There were plenty of flowers and many growing plants, from tall palms to little creepings things that seemed as if they were there by accident. Although the day was mild, a great fire blazed in the grate; a great smoke gray Persian cat lay

fast asleep on the white hearthrug; the cushions of the couch near the fire were disordered, as if someone had lately been sitting there; an open book lay face down upon the end of the couch, and a couple of fashion journals were thrown carelessly near.

“Yes,” said Lady Lucifer to herself, “it’s a pleasant room.”

And then the door opened and Lettice Charteris came in.

## CHAPTER VII

SHE came in with a sort of rush, both hands extended, her face alight with pleasure.

"How good of you to come to see me! I do think it kind of you. I had an idea that you were in town."

"We *are* in town," said Lady Lucifer with a laugh. "The truth is, my husband gets so hideously bored that we have come down for a fortnight to please him. I think if it were not for a certain sense of obligation, I should never go to London for the season at all."

"Ah, but you must," said Lettice Charteris seriously, "you must. That is the one advantage, Lady Lucifer, of being a nobody. One need do nothing one does not want. We have really come to Blankhampton in prospect of next winter's hunting, but if we should change our minds and go away before next winter comes, nobody will blame us, for we are under no obligation to anyone."

"Well, you won't get better hunting anywhere," said Lady Lucifer sensibly, "so if you are keen on it, you had better stick to the place."

It's not bad, there are very nice people here, and delightful people a little way out."

"How did you know of us?" said Lettice.

"Ah well, you see, I have a young cousin who is deeply interested in you."

"Mr. Valentine?"

"Yes."

She looked straight at the girl expecting to see her blush. But there was no blush on Lettice's fair cheeks, she smiled a little in quite a heart-whole way, but did not seem to be the least confused by what Lady Lucifer's tone implied.

"Ah, he's a nice boy, a very nice boy. It was good of him to mention me to you."

Lady Lucifer looked at her searchingly. "Miss Charteris," she said, "I can't stay very long with you to-day because I've a house full of people at Matcham, and I have promised to take back materials for an absurd scheme of dressing up they have on for dinner to-night, but I want you and your brother to come out and stay a couple of days with us, then we shall get to know one another better. I am not very much in Blankhampton—in a way I am really a busy kind of person, with a large house and a husband who wants a great deal of attention, to say nothing of children who look to me for everything."

"Won't it be troubling you?"

"Not a bit. We shall expect you and your brother on Wednesday, any time in the afternoon.

If you drive out, we shall expect you in time to dress for dinner at the latest. If you come by train, there is one which leaves Blankhampton at a quarter to six that we find the most convenient for guests to come by, and I will send to meet that."

"Oh," cried Lettice, "but Matcham is within a drive?"

"Oh yes, I drove in this afternoon."

"Then we can drive out."

Then she, by a sudden impulse, took Lady Lucifer's hand as they sat together on the wide couch.

"Lady Lucifer," she said, "I can't tell you how good I think it that you should come and see me like this and ask me to your house. It makes all the difference, when one comes to a place like Blankhampton, who you know in the beginning. I *do* think it is kind of you."

"Not at all, dear, not at all. And, as I told you, John Valentine is very interested in you, and he told me that you had letters of introduction, and among them one to me."

"Not quite that, Lady Lucifer, not quite that," said Lettice. "I have letters of introduction to several people in the neighbourhood, but not one to you."

"Oh—but he thought so. But there, that makes no difference. I have come to see you and I am charmed with you, and I shall be delighted to see you at Matcham."



Now, as a matter of fact, Matcham was one of the three great houses which carried weight in the neighbourhood of Blankhampton. There were people who thought that Lady Lucifer was not as scrupulous in keeping up her great position as she might have been, but, on the other hand, there were others who thought that Lady Mallinboro' had of late years grown very idle or very indifferent in social matters, while Lady Vivian, the chate-laine of Ingleby, had always been too good-natured to prove herself much of a social thermometer. So that upon Lady Lucifer seemed to have fallen the onus of setting the fashion, for or against new comers in the neighbourhood.

Now, among those who were known personally to Lady Lucifer there was, in a sense, a great gulf fixed. There were the people whom Lady Lucifer knew, to whom she bowed graciously and passed a pleasant word with on the rare occasions when she met them; and there were those to whom she always stood and talked a little while and was very friendly with when she came in contact with them at bazaars and other gatherings of an *omnium gatherum* nature. But those whom Lady Lucifer invited to her house were few, and those whom she invited to stay in her house were still fewer; indeed, it had come to be a sign of grace which none disputed, that if one were good enough to be asked to stay at Matcham, one was good

enough for all sorts and conditions of society in Blankshire. Already Lettice Charteris had grasped that much, indeed you could not live in the old Cathedral city and not grasp as much, unless you happened to be born short in your wits. Now, Lettice Charteris was not short in her wits, on the contrary, and to the very full she recognised the value of the invitation which her visitor had given her that afternoon. But she was sweetly reproachful to John Valentine on the subject of the letter when she saw him an hour later.

“I do think, Mr. Valentine, that it was good and kind and sweet of you to speak of me to your cousin.”

“What, Violet Lucifer?”

“Yes, Lady Lucifer; she has been here this afternoon.”

“Oh, has she? That was *décent* of her, yes, that was downright decent of her. Was she nice?”

“Oh yes, awfully nice, couldn’t have been nicer. She has asked us to go over to Matcham on Wednesday for a couple of days.”

“Has she though? That *was* downright decent of her. I always did like Violet.”

“There’s only one thing,” said Lettice in her sweetest tones, “you told her that—that—”

“Well, I told her what?”

“You said that I had a letter of introduction to her. Well, I haven’t.”

"You told me so."

"Oh no—letters of introduction, but I haven't one to Lady Lucifer."

"Oh—I quite thought you said so. Now, how could I have made such a mistake as that. Does it matter?"

"Not a bit, only she happened to speak of it, and of course, I told her that you had made a mistake."

"It was right down stupid of me," said John Valentine ingenuously, "I can't think how I came to misunderstand you so. I could have sworn you told me you had a letter of introduction to Lady Lucifer."

"No, I couldn't, for I never had. Look here, shall I make a confession to you?"

"A confession—to me!"

"Yes. I happened to tell some people that I knew in Cairo two years ago—I was dining with them in London—that we, Dick and I, had taken a house at Blankhampton, and they said in the friendly kind of way that people do, 'Oh, we were quartered there before George left the Service. It's a very jolly place, very hospitable people, you'll like it immensely. We'll give you letters of introduction.' They happened to name Lady Lucifer among the people they would write me letters for. They did send me half a dozen letters, but when they came, Lady Lucifer's was not among them. I didn't think about them until we

had got ourselves completely settled down—one doesn't, you know. The Deanery people called on me—I suppose because I applied for sittings—and I happened to meet one of the people to whom I had a letter of introduction the day that I returned Lady Margaret's visit. I felt, somehow, after seeing her, that I would just find out something about the other people before I sent off the letters that I had brought with me. So I drove round to all the houses and took stock of them, and I came to the conclusion that I had better know one good person to begin with, than a dozen—well—less good. So I never presented them at all. See?"

"I don't think," said John Valentine, "that it matters at all, and I'm sure that my cousin feels that way too."

A queer expression flitted across Lettice Charteris' face. Perhaps it was the sudden change from the familiar "Violet Lucifer" to "my cousin" that brought such an indescribable look to her expressive face. Anyway, she drew herself up, and her tone changed also.

"Tell me," she said very anxiously, "have I done something horribly *mal apropos*? Will it make any difference to Lady Lucifer? Do you think—oughtn't I to have done that, ought I to have sent the letters of introduction—was it obligatory? Do tell me, you know English society so much better than I do."

"Oh—I don't think so—and I don't know that you're not absolutely right. I wonder," he went on, "whether she will ask me to go out on Wednesday."

"Can you get leave?" asked Lettice.

"Oh, I suppose so. If she doesn't ask me to stay, or I can't get leave, I can go out to dinner if I'm asked."

"I see—yes, you can."

Now when John Valentine got back to his quarters that afternoon, he found a little note that Lady Lucifer had sent up to the barracks by hand.

"Dear John, I went and saw your divinity this afternoon. She's quite a charming divinity, and I've asked her to come out to Matcham for a couple of days on Wednesday afternoon, with the brother, of course. You will find your room ready if you can get leave at the same time. I think I ought to warn you that a *ci-devant* charmer of yours will be with us. Will it be a little awkward for you, dear old boy? I hope not. Or will you change your mind and go back to your old love? Now that you are a full blown catch on your own account, which you know you are, John, you ought to make up your mind very sternly on such points as this. Your affectionate cousin, Violet Lucifer."

"She's a brick, is Violet Lucifer," John Valentine's thoughts ran; "yes, she's a great brick. It's a great thing to have a cousin like that—married—and with no sort of idea of keeping one

always dangling after her. No wonder Lucifer thinks so much of her. Now who, by the bye, is this *ci-devant* love of mine. The girl that I was most gone on before I set eyes on Lettice was Trixie Armitage, but Trixie Armitage as the guest of Lord and Lady Lucifer is absolutely preposterous—couldn't be. Might be Lady Ethel—no, it wouldn't be Lady Ethel, no no—besides, I heard a rumour of her having taken up with Cairngorm, who's a much better catch than I am. Then there was Mousie Parker—couldn't be Mousie Parker, Violet Lucifer would have no incentive to ask her—unless she wanted to do me a bad turn, and if she wanted to do me a bad turn, she would never have gone to see Miss Charteris. Well, I'll have to give it up, and it's no use any other fair charmer thinking she's going to be the chatelaine of Valentine's Hope, and it's no use my worrying myself about it one way or the other."

But although he did not exactly worry himself, he did wonder once or twice during the four days which intervened, who the girl was likely to be who would be staying at Matcham at the same time as Lettice Charteris. He succeeded in getting his leave. It was not difficult to get leave when one of the great houses in the neighbourhood had to be considered, and as soon as he was free on Wednesday afternoon, John Valentine gaily betook himself out of Blankhampton Barracks and, driving in an extremely smart dog cart,

turned his horse's head in the direction of Matcham. He found Lady Lucifer at home when he arrived.

"My dear boy," she said, "I am so pleased to see you a little early. I'm all alone, the others have all gone off somewhere or other on some giddy jaunt. One lot went away this morning, and another will be arriving all this afternoon—including your charmer. Yes, she is a charmer; I hope the brother is as nice."

"Oh, he's all right. It was awfully good of you to go and see her. By the bye, Violet, who is the old flame that I'm to meet?"

"Old flame?" said she, "ah, that's a secret that will keep. She's not come yet—ha! ha!"

"I have been casting about in my mind," said he, leaning his arms on the table and looking fixedly at her, "and I've gone over all my old loves—I admit that they were many—but with the exception of Ethel Huntingtower, I really do not know anybody that's likely to be coming here."

"It isn't Ethel Huntingtower," said Lady Lucifer quietly.

"Oh, it isn't? Then I give it up. After all, nobody else much matters."

"If I had thought that Ethel Huntingtower would have mattered," said she, "I might have made an effort to ask her, but really Lucifer does dislike the girl so much that I never ask her except when he is safely off on a fishing expedition."

"My dear Violet," said he, "I am sure that you are the most considerate cousin that a fellow ever had in the world, but I don't want you to sacrifice yourself, to say nothing of your husband, to bring me in touch with Ethel Huntingtower. In the first place, Ethel Huntingtower couldn't bear me—I was a bit smitten with her, I admit—but she, you know, is in all probability going to marry Cairngorm."

"Really! And he's *such* a friend of Lucifer's! We shall *have* to ask her here when Lucifer is at home in that case."

"And now," said he, changing the conversation abruptly, "what do you really think of Lettice Charteris?"

"I think," said Lady Lucifer, "that she is very charming—pretty manners—beautiful person—a little older than you, John?"

"She's four and twenty," said he.

"Yes, I should have thought as much, if not more. Well, that's purely a matter for your own consideration. And, by the way," she said suddenly, "you told me that she had brought a letter of introduction to me, but she says no, nothing of the kind. How came you to make such a mistake?"



## CHAPTER VIII

Now it happened that L'Estrange, having had a week's leave in London, came back to the regiment not knowing anything of the visit of Lady Lucifer to the house in Little Ogledal. He arrived home late on Wednesday night, to find among the batch of letters awaiting him a note from Lady Lucifer inviting him to go out and dine and sleep at Matcham on Thursday. He had already heard that John Valentine was staying with his cousin, and he wrote a note to Lady Lucifer accepting her invitation before he got into his cot that night.

Not having seen Lettice Charteris for over a week, he determined to utilise the following afternoon by having a quiet hour with her.

Now, it was the first time that the door of No. 7 Little Ogledal had been opened to him by anyone but the radiant Charles. As a natural thing Charles was taking a little holiday, in company with the extremely smart parlour-maid who helped him to wait at table, and it was the house-maid who opened in answer to L'Estrange's summons.

"Miss Charteris at home?"

"Miss Charteris is away, sir."

“ Oh, really, really ! And Mr. Charteris also ? ”

“ Yes, Mr. Charteris is away also.”

He handed a card and walked away, feeling in some unaccountable manner as if he had had a slap in the face. It had never occurred to him that the lovely Lettice would be away, that Charles the resplendent would be absent from his post. He felt ruffled, so much so that he went to call at a house in an adjacent court which boasted of five noisy young daughters. They were very noisy, very gay, the Orpington girls, and L'Estrange found himself in the middle of quite a party. There were two men of his own regiment, and several others belonging to a line regiment quartered at Blankhampton, and he stayed so long that he had to get himself back to barracks in a cab in order to start for Matcham in anything like time. Then he dressed, and getting into the Stanhope which was awaiting him at the door of the officers' quarters, he turned his horse's head towards the open country. It was a lovely evening, and he had ample time for reflection as he drove along between the sweet-smelling hedgerows. Curiously enough, the ruffled feeling was still with him, a feeling of ill-usage that Lettice Charteris should have gone away without apprising him of the fact. True, he had gone to town for a few days without acquainting Lettice with the day and hour of his return. He was not the least little bit in love with Lettice—at least, he told himself so as he drove

along. He regarded himself as an intimate friend of the house, and thought it distinctly remiss that he should be so completely "out of sight, out of mind" with her.

And then he fell to thinking of John Valentine, and how he had got to know Lettice. How cleverly he had worked it, how impetuous he was! "Of course he's in love with her," his thoughts ran, and then he put his head back with a jerk. "Poor chap! I'm afraid it's no go, John; Lettice will never look at you."

Then his thoughts were directed to the cool beauty of the scene. "How fresh and jolly it is out here," he said to himself; "what fools people are to swelter in stuffy London, making believe by gaudy window boxes and ribbon gardening in the Park that they are enjoying summer!"

Why had he been to London? Why, when he had a few days' leave, hadn't he gone to some place where he could have got a breath of the sea, or a whiff of the moors? Why? Because London was London, and let it be as fresh as it will elsewhere, and the scenery never so lovely, sea and moor, air and freshness all combined do not go to weigh down the balance against the charm of the great city. And he had seen *her*. Of course, he had got over that affair of two years ago in Cairo. He had proved the impossibility of nursing any hopes in that direction; he knew perfectly well that it wouldn't work if what he had

once hoped could be brought about. And yet, when certain events were approaching, he was always more or less uneasy, he was always drawn, like a moth to a candle, and so, when he had got a few days' leave at the height of the season, he had gone to London. Now he vaguely regretted it. Well, one cannot eat one's cake and have it too. He had seen *her*, Carmine Adair, the girl for whom, two years before, he would have laid down his life willingly and cheerfully. She had not stooped to pick up the jewel he had cast at her feet. At this point he pulled himself up short, and told himself that he was an ass and a drivelling idiot, that he had never cast anything at Carmine Adair's feet—that is to say, he had never asked her to marry him. He had cast a favourable eye upon her, he had certainly advanced a good way along the road which usually leads to marriage. And then there had come in another—a German—a prince of sorts, and Carmine Adair had been distinctly dazzled by him. Unlike most Germans of old lineage and lofty title, this fellow was very rich, and lived in great style. He was good-looking too, of a fleshy type, and had the measured rythmical tramp of the trained German soldier. Seeing this great hulking brute in the society of a dainty, ethereal little person like Carmine Adair had upset L'Estrange completely, and he had withdrawn from the contest, or from any possibility of a contest. And now as he drove along

by the cool English hedgerows, having seen Carmine Adair, he felt that he had been wrong in doing so, and yet that Fate had been good to him.

Then his thoughts went back once more to Lettice Charteris.

"She seems to have known Von Zeidel very well. At all events her convictions concerning him are pronounced enough for her to have known him intimately. She was right too, he was a brute—an utter brute. How very odd to have known someone so well in Cairo, and then to meet again and be intimate in Blankhampton. But how much more odd to have no remembrance of that first friendship! I wonder," said L'Estrange to himself, as the high towers of Matcham came in sight, "I wonder if Dillory was right. Gad, it's an awful thing to have a doubt about one's sanity!"

However, he had not much more time for thinking about it. He reached the entrance of Matcham, and his man got down to open the elaborate iron gates, which hung between great stone posts surmounted each one by an imp rampant holding a pitchfork. He had still a drive of a quarter of a mile or so, but it seemed only a few minutes ere he found himself entering at the great doorway.

Now, the chief mission in the life of the butler at Matcham was not, like Charles at Little Ogledal, to smooth this vale of tears into a smiling pathway,

not at all. On the contrary, Edmund was a most solemn person, most of anything like a bishop with a keen sense of the dignity of his office. He waddled forward when L'Estrange reached the inner hall, received him blandly, and issued several suave orders to large pincushion kind of persons, wearing plush of various colours. It was then five minutes to eight o'clock.

"I think," said Edmund, "that her ladyship is not yet down, but there are already some ladies in the drawing-room."

So L'Estrange found, and he had not been more than a minute or two talking when Lady Lucifer herself came in.

"Now, this is really friendly of you to come at such short notice," she said. "I always feel that we must do a little at seeing our friends when we come on these short visits. Oh yes, we have to do it because Lord Lucifer is always more or less wretched in town, and we come down to Matcham just as a whale would come up to the surface of the water to breathe. Did you drive out?"

"Yes."

"I hope you put your horse up."

"No, I sent him down to the inn."

"Oh, but we have plenty of room."

"I thought the man would inconvenience you. He's very well placed there, I've stayed there myself. Thank you very much."

Then he gave a start as he saw Lettice Charteris coming down the long room towards him.

"Ah, I see you two know each other," said Lady Lucifer.

Lettice smiled upon him, and then upon her hostess. "Oh yes, we have known each other a long time," she said. "I didn't know you were coming to dinner to-night, Mr. L'Estrange."

"Or I that I should find you at Matcham," he returned.

"Ah, Lady Lucifer was kind and came in to see me on Saturday, and asked us out here to stay. I'm having a lovely time."

"By the bye," said Lady Lucifer, turning to her at this point, "Mr. L'Estrange takes you in to dinner to-night."

"What luck!" said L'Estrange in Lettice's ear. "Do you know I went round to see you this afternoon."

"Did you?"

"Yes—by Jove! There's dinner already—yes," he continued, as they made their way down the long room, "I'd no idea that you even knew Lady Lucifer, and I felt kind of ill-used when the maid who answered the door told me that you were away."

"Poor Mr. L'Estrange! If I had thought you would have felt like that, I would have written you a little line to tell you where we were going. Don't you think it was very nice of Mr. Valentine to get his cousin to come and see me?"

"I do, but you had a letter of introduction to Lady Lucifer."

“ Ah, that seems to be a mistake that is generally believed. I had letters of introduction—not one to Lady Lucifer.”

“ Oh—I thought you said so.”

“ No, not one to Lady Lucifer, but that does not matter. She came to see me and she was charming. Here I am and enjoying myself immensely. How do you like my frock? ”

L'Estrange looked at her from head to foot as a man does look at a woman with whom he is on more than ordinary terms of intimacy. “ Yes, it's very sweet,” he said, “ one of those little frocks that might be worn by a child and yet cost a good deal of money.”

“ How well you know,” she exclaimed. “ Now, I don't believe there's another man in the room who knows that much.”

“ I do,” said L'Estrange, “ and I shouldn't be surprised if you got that frock of one Doucet.”

“ I did.”

“ And it cost—thirty guineas? ”

“ Thereabouts,” she said with a laugh.

“ Oh, the frock is perfect of its kind, but it isn't your frock that makes your *tout ensemble* to-night.”

“ Then what is it? ”

“ I don't know, there's something elusive about you, something nobody else has—the way your hair sets—the turn of your throat—the way you



use your hands. No frock could make any difference to those, no frock could even spoil them. As it is, this little bit of expensive simplicity simply forms a judicious setting for the rest of you."

"Oh, Mr. L'Estrange, you mustn't compliment me like that, you'll turn my head."

"I think," said L'Estrange, "if I were able to turn your head I might flatter myself a good deal more than I do. And I foresee that I'm not going to get a very good time to-night, unless the lady on my other side of me can spare me a little notice, for here is John Valentine bearing down upon us like a ship in a storm at sea. I believe it would be a good thing if he and I changed ladies."

"And you want to?" she asked.

"No," said L'Estrange sturdily, "that's exactly what I don't want to do."

## CHAPTER IX

FROM the time of her visit to Matcham, the position of Lettice Charteris in Blankhampton was assured. The fact that she and her brother had stayed at Matcham for three days and that Lady Lucifer had more than once called her "dear" and that, moreover, she had suggested that Lettice should pay her a visit in London, seemed to permeate through the mazes of Blankhampton society with the impalpable rapidity of a deadly disease.

"A charming creature, my dear," said one of the shining lights in the Cathedral set to another, "a charming creature. I don't know when I've seen a girl with such real dignity. Good looking enough outside, but a dream in her own house. And they've made the house so pretty!"

"Ah, the house is a beautiful house, and the Owen-Elvingtons left it in such perfect order."

"But, my dear, it's a dream to what the Owen-Elvingtons left."

"You don't say so!"

"Yes, and she's such a gracious house-mistress, I was charmed with her. Well dressed, you know,

without any ostentation. A simple white serge frock with a silver belt. No jewellery, no finery—”

“Oh, my dear, her rings are worth a king’s ransom.”

“I don’t know,” said the first lady, “how much a king’s ransom is worth. She does wear a few rings, they seem to be her only weakness.”

“I don’t know, my dear Mrs. Berkeley, but I have my suspicions about the simplicity of those little frocks of hers.”

“I never had,” said Mrs. Berkeley, “and I was so sure that I was right and that everybody else was wrong, that I asked her.”

“You asked her—about what?”

“I said to her in a casual kind of way, ‘I suppose you go to Paquin for your dresses?’ Such a queer look came across her face, ‘Oh no, my dear Mrs. Berkeley, I have a little French woman who does me extremely well.’ ‘In Blankhampton,’ said I. ‘No,’ she said, ‘she’s not in Blankhampton, she’s in Paris.’ ‘Will you hand her on to a deserving friend?’ ‘No, I’m afraid not,’ she said. ‘I could tell you of half-a-dozen little dressmakers in one part of France and another, but this particular one will not make for anyone until she has a vacancy.’ ‘And she’s cheap?’ ‘Oh, yes.’ I knew it,” Mrs. Berkeley went on, “I knew it, I was certain of it, I know a thing or two.”

“I’m sure you do. But what a treasure the

woman must be ! I've never seen Doucet's lines so wonderfully repeated before."

Mrs. Markham smiled. "I wonder," she said, "where they were brought up, and where they lived."

"Well, they've rather a history."

"Oh yes, I gathered that."

"You see, when we were at Matcham together she confided in me a good deal. She and her brother were wards in Chancery, he is a little the elder of the two. She's devoted to him, my dear, I don't know that I've ever seen any young girl in my life so utterly devoted to her brother as that girl is to hers. 'You see, dear Mrs. Berkeley,' she said, 'I must think of the boy. He didn't have a very good time when he was young, I did. You see, I was brought up by the good sisters in the Convent of the Immaculée Conception near Paris. They were very good to me.' 'Ah, then you are a Catholic?' I asked. 'Oh no, oh dear no, a Protestant, a black Protestant.' 'Really! But did they never try to influence you, one way or another?' 'Well, I won't say that they did not try, according to their lights, to put me in the right path, but I was never convinced. I always felt that conviction to me would mean the veil, and the veil to me is absolutely terrible. Of course, I don't say,' she went on, 'that there are not some women who would be happier if they took the veil, and are much happier when they take that

line, but it wouldn't do for me. I'm such a home bird, and I never had a home from the time I was quite little, from the time our dear mother died, until now. We have taken furnished houses, we've lived in hotels, we've had a yacht, we've travelled, we've seen the world, Dick and I, and we've done our best to make up for the fact that up to the time I came of age we were held tight in the grip of the law which took care of us. We've been everywhere, seen everything, done everything. Then it suddenly came to us that we wanted to settle down, to have a place of our own, to be in quiet, good society, something a little different to mere wanderers. We have many friends, we have known charming people, but Dick yearned for hunting, I yearned for a home, a place of my own.' 'But you will marry,' I said. 'I think not, dear lady,' she said with a queer, sad little smile, 'I don't think I could possibly leave Dick.' 'But Dick will leave you?' 'I don't think so. Of course, he may marry, one can never tell; I should be the last to grudge it if he were happy in his marriage. But in that case he would look out for a place near by.' 'Oh, then the house is yours?' 'Well, it's ours, but Dick would never dream of turning me out. It was the home I made for myself. If he chose to take a wife, she would make her own home, and he would help her. But somehow, I don't think that Dick is a marrying man,' "

So, filtered through the medium of Mrs. Berkeley and Mrs. Markham, together with the open friendship of Lady Margaret at the Deanery, and the fact that she had been a house guest at Matcham, Lettice Charteris passed into the very front rank of good society in Blankhampton. She was very wise in her day and generation, and gave herself no airs, and was sweet and charming to everybody, although she was more friendly to some than to others. The men at the different barracks in the garrison all became friendly, not to say intimate, with the charming mistress of No. 7 Little Ogledal, and I need hardly say that where the soldiers were to be found, the young ladies of the town somehow seemed to drift, and during the hours between five and seven the radiant Charles was kept extremely busy and the door knocker of the charming old house was constantly at work. I think there was only one person who was not pleased at the new state of things, and that was John Valentine.

"I think I shall give up coming to Little Ogledal, Miss Charteris," he remarked one afternoon, when he had tried for over two hours to get a private word with her.

"Give up coming! What do you mean?"

"Well, when I first knew you, this house was the haven of my life. Now it's a refuge for the destitute of Blankhampton."

"Really—Mr. Valentine!"

"Oh, I don't mean that—not in that sense, you know it. I come here to see you, I don't want to see Miss Waring, or Miss anybody else—the whole thing makes me sick."

"But you ought to like a house where there are plenty of charming girls."

"I don't. I like one charming girl, that is enough for me. I like salmon for dinner once a week, I can even stick it twice, but salmon for every meal—oh, thank you for nothing."

"Yes, but I continually ask you to dinner, I don't continually ask other people to dinner, I don't see the majority of people except in conventional hours. You come in and go out as you like."

"Do I?"

"Well, I think you do. Last night you turned up after your mess, I was all alone here. The night before you dined with us. The day before that was Sunday, you came in after the afternoon service at the Parish, and you stayed to supper. I don't know, Mr. Valentine, that it's quite proper that you should be here so much, particularly as I haven't a chaperon."

"It mayn't be proper, but it's—oh, well, you know what it is to me," he said.

"No, indeed and I do not know, and if I mistake not I hear Mr. L'Estrange's voice."

"Just my luck!" said the young gentleman indignantly; "just my luck!"

"You and your luck amuse me very much. As I thought, it is Mr. L'Estrange. Why, you are quite a stranger, what have you been doing with yourself?"

"Oh, I've had two or three days' shooting. I've not been away, you know, but I had the chance of two or three days' shooting and I was glad of the chance. I've brought you some game."

"You must come and help to eat it. How is it you don't seem ever to get any shooting, Mr. Valentine?"

"Oh, I get shooting, right enough."

"I haven't missed you," she said mischievously.

"No, I think it's cheaper to go to the game shop," he said.

He had spoken under his breath, but L'Estrange, who was not intended to hear, caught the words. He laughed outright at the boyish petulance, and sitting down by his hostess, entered into an ordinary trivial conversation with her, fully aware the while that John Valentine was fuming desperately. But John Valentine did not budge. He sat, indeed, until L'Estrange remarked that it was high time they betook themselves back to barracks.

"Come along, Toddy, my friend," he said when he had shaken hands with Lettice.

"Presently," said John Valentine crossly.

"No, no, you'd better come back to barracks with me, I'm sure Miss Charteris has had enough of you."



Lettice laughed. She was sitting on the wide, luxurious fender stool, and as she looked up at L'Estrange he noted the sheen of the electric lights on her chestnut hair, noted the clearness of her eyes, and the fine smoothness of her satin skin. Suddenly a flash of remembrance came to him. Where had he seen her in just such an attitude? Only her seat had been a heap of stones, and instead of electric lights, the dazzling sun overhead. He uttered an exclamation under his breath.

"What did you say?" said Lettice.

"I didn't say anything," he returned.

But the flash was gone.

"You were going to say something surely?"

"I—I was trying to remember where I had seen you before."

"But you knew her in Egypt," said John Valentine, looking up.

"But in just that attitude. An idle occupation, my dear chap, but a trick that mind frequently plays us. When I was a boy," he went on, "I mean a young boy, I had a distinct remembrance of having lived before, having been in a former incarnation. When I went to Egypt everything was so familiar to me—the people, the tongue, the climate, the buildings, the dazzling blue of the sky, the long stretches of arid desert, with here and there a patch of green, and the pyramids, they were the most familiar of all. It was like going home."

"I felt that too," said Lettice, "I felt it too."

"You don't mean to say that——" Then John Valentine broke off short and sat looking at Lettice with apprehensive eyes.

"I didn't hear what you said, Mr. Valentine."

"No, I stopped. I was going to ask you if you recognised any people who had been in your previous incarnation."

Lettice shuddered "I hope not. I wasn't happy when I was in the world before, I wasn't suited to the period I was in. I hate Egypt and everything in it. I don't know why I went back to it this time; I seemed to feel it calling, calling, calling—I had to go, to sit day after day watching the pyramids against the sky, to sit staring at the Sphinx—oh—don't talk about Egypt, talk about dear, beloved, wholesome, fresh green England. Why," she went on, "the most commonplace English back street is worth all the palaces of Egypt. They're horrid, they are steeped in every kind of misery and crime, splendid in a squalid, inartistic, lurid kind of way; but compare the Egyptian home with this, this abode of peace, this home that has no mystery about it! You feel that there have been generations of honest, God-fearing, clean-living men and women, and, and they have left their stamp upon the very walls. "Why," and she looked round with a smile, "does not the very atmosphere breathe such a feeling to you two? Don't you feel when you

come in here that it's calm, quiet, honest, straight, wholesome? In Egypt one lives in a palace, garish, vast, inconvenient, tumble-down, detestable, and the whole atmosphere, the air you breathe, the stones of the street that your feet press, the very dust of the desert, all reek of passion, of betrayal, of wickedness—Ugh! Don't talk to me of Egypt."

## CHAPTER X

FOR a moment the two men were too much astonished to speak. Then John Valentine broke the silence when it had become almost painful.

"Oh well, come now," he said in his modern, unsentimental clipped accents, "as to that, Miss Charteris, if you had not mentioned Egypt, I should never have known you'd been there. I thought you liked the place?"

"Oh, I talk great nonsense," she said, pulling herself together with a great effort; "you touched some chord, one or other of you, that made me feel as if I were the reincarnation of Cleopatra. I've always liked Cleopatra, she was as full of whims and caprices as an egg is full of meat, but she lived every moment of her time. I don't think we modern men and women know what it is to look at life from the standpoint of such a personality. Why, you look quite pale, both of you. I don't often let myself go—you see what there is underneath."

"Gad! You frightened me out of my wits, and L'Estrange has a face like a piece of chalk."

"I beg your pardon," said L'Estrange, casting a look at himself in the great glass over the fireplace, "I may look like chalk, but I don't feel like

it—on the contrary. And now, young man, you must come along, we haven't got a minute to spare."

He resolutely hustled his comrade out of the room and out of the house, and together they went back to their quarters, only separating as they reached the head of the stairs.

L'Estrange changed into mess dress in about ten minutes, and finding that he had at least ten minutes to spare, he sent for a glass of sherry and bitters and set himself down to enjoy a quarter of a pipe.

Now what, his thoughts ran, had he said that had contrived to set Lettice Charteris off in that extraordinary way. He had talked to her about Egypt lots of times, she had discussed all sorts of modern men and women without apparently ever having any high falutin or romantic thoughts in her whole composition. What, then, had made her suddenly seem to dip into the past, just as he had done. Was it really true that she, too, had a recollection of some bygone days? Had they been Egyptian man and woman hundreds of years before—and had they been together? The very thought was enough to change the entire current of L'Estrange's being, something which he had never experienced in his life before seemed to flutter from his heart to his feet, then up to his head, then back to his heart again, a sort of qualm, as when a man does a dangerous thing for the first

time in his life. His remembrance of Egypt had, as a matter of fact, been bounded by the personality of Carmine Adair, with her *petite*, svelte figure, her deep red hair, her sapphire blue eyes, her roguish little tempting face. And he had seen her only a few weeks ago in London; he had looked at her, talked to her, and watched her without so much as a tremor of the heart. Odd, it was not so long that he had believed he was very much in love with her, and no doubt, but for the intervention of Von Zeidel—and, taking for granted that the girl herself would have accepted him—she would now have been Mrs. George L'Estrange. And without doubt, that same little girl had been more than attracted by him, only the ambitions of a worldly-minded mother had come in to spoil a match that was certainly a good one, because the elder lady had been dazzled by the title and wealth of the German brute whom L'Estrange loathed as he would have loathed a toad.

He could not help feeling a certain satisfaction in knowing that the delicate machinations of Lady Adair had been frustrated, and that, for some reason or other, the alliance had never come off.

He upheaved himself as he heard the dinner call, and knocking the ashes out of his pipe, he went off along the echoing corridor, and jingled down the stone stairs with one thread of thought running through his mind.

“Jolly lucky thing for her, poor little girl, that

she was spared being tied up to such a brute as that. By Jove, he was a brute!" And then, as he reached the still summer air, he said to himself, "Well, after all, I owe the German something. It was a lucky get-out for me."

Over and over again during the evening he found himself thinking involuntarily of Lettice Charteris.

"L'Estrange, old man," he said to himself, when he was once more alone in his rooms, "don't do anything in a hurry. If you had acted on impulse before, you would have found yourself tied up to Carmine Adair for the rest of your life. No man," he said wisely, "ought to marry until he literally can't help himself."

Now, L'Estrange was not very sure whether he really wanted to marry Lettice Charteris or not. That is to say, he was sure he wanted to marry her, but he was not quite sure whether he would be in the same mind in twenty years' time. He got into his cot that night having made up his mind to one thing, which was, that Lettice would keep for a little while, and that he would think things seriously over before he committed himself one way or another. He determined, moreover, just as he was falling asleep, that he would cultivate the brother's acquaintance to a certain extent; yes, he would do that.

"Nice chap," his very sleepy thoughts ran, "nice chap. Clean and wholesome—knows a

horse, too—no airs and graces—nothing fishy about him. I wonder if he was out in Cairo, I never saw him there. Well, that doesn't matter. I'll send him a note to-morrow morning, and ask him to dine with me to-morrow night.'

Then he went to sleep and slept as the young, healthy and well tired man does sleep. He awoke in the morning with a sense of strangeness. At first he could not remember what had happened the previous night, then, as his thoughts became more collected, and as he drank the tea his servant had brought him, the remembrance came back to him of what he had mentally decided to do ere he had gone to sleep. He felt that his decision to cultivate Lettice's brother a little was an extremely wise one, and as soon as he was dressed, he wrote a note and told his man to take it down to Little Ogledal without loss of time, also that he was to wait for an answer. In due time he received a note back from Charteris in which he intimated that he accepted his invitation with pleasure.

He drove out to Matcham in the afternoon in order to pay his devoirs to Lady Lucifer before she should return to town. He found the house full of gay people, and he did not tear himself away until it was time to get back in time to dress and receive his guest. In due course Dick Charteris with other guests arrived, and also in due course dinner was announced, and the commanding officer made his way towards the dining-room.



"Now, I wonder where John Valentine is," said L'Estrange, looking down the long table.

"Valentine—oh, Valentine," Charteris laughed, "oh, he's not dining here to-night, he's dining with my sister."

"Your sister!"

"Yes, she's got Mr. and Mrs. Uffington dining with her, and she asked Valentine to take my place."

"Oh, good thing John should make himself useful," said L'Estrange carelessly, nor did he again trouble about the fact that his young comrade was making a fourth to fill the place of Lettice's brother.

If he had only known! At that moment John Valentine was sitting at the foot of the pleasant dinner table at No. 7 Little Ogledal. Quite at home he looked, and quite at home I must confess he felt. The other guests were young and lively, and never had John Valentine known Lettice so gay, or, for the matter of that, so frivolous. They sat long at the table, for, as I daresay you know, when people are very full of fun and wit is flowing readily, it is astonishing how long one can spin out a little dinner. At eleven o'clock the Uffingtons' carriage came for them, and they went away with many protestations that they had really thought it was a couple of hours earlier.

"Well, do not go yet," said Lettice.

"No, no, my dear," said Mrs. Uffington, "we

must go, because we have such a ghastly way to drive home, and we have to go to London at ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Oh, I see, then I can't say anything more. It is a ghastly way to drive, and it's very good of you to come to dinner."

"Very good of you to ask us, and we hope you'll come out and dine with us many times."

"Oh, I shall come when I'm asked," said Lettice with her gay unusual smile.

At last they betook themselves away. Then John Valentine stretched himself and said piously, "Thank God!"

"And why?" said Lettice with the laugh still upon her lips and in her eyes.

"I've been longing to get rid of them for an hour past. Did it ever occur to you," he said, looking at her fixedly, "that there is a certain class of people who never know when other people have had enough of them?"

"But I hadn't."

"Oh—hadn't you? You know, I might be dreadfully offended at that."

"You might be, but I don't think you will, no," she said, setting herself down in her accustomed corner of the great lounge, which was her favourite resting place, "I don't think you will."

John Valentine took possession of the other corner of the lounge. "I am quite sure," said he, "that I couldn't be offended with you, whatever you did."

“ Really? ”

“ No, not under any circumstances. I wanted these people to go—they’re charming people, delightful people, never was so much in love with a married couple in my life before, but all the same, I wanted them to go because I wanted to have you to myself. I could have killed them as long as they hanged on talking drivel about the distance their house is from Blankhampton. I suppose it’s no further off than it was yesterday, or last month. But now they’re gone I feel full of charity, I’d forgive ’em that and a hundred other things. I say, Lettice—you said I might call you Lettice, didn’t you? ”

“ I don’t think I ever did, but you may if you like.”

“ Thank you so much. Lettice—it’s a pretty name, but I don’t think it goes well with Charteris.”

“ Oh, don’t you? Most people think it goes extremely well with Charteris.”

“ Ah, most people are more or less short in their understanding. No, the name Lettice was never made to go with Charteris, but there is a name that it was meant to go with, and that is Valentine.”

“ Oh, do you think so? ”

“ I don’t only think so, because thinking expresses doubt, and I like to be sure of myself.”

“ But all people are not sure of themselves.”

“ Oh, but I am, you see. What I am not sure of is not myself, but you.”

“And are you not sure of me?”

“Oh, don’t beat about the bush and fence, it isn’t worthy of you. You know what I am trying to say—Gad! and I’m going to say it too, that’s another thing. Now, to come straight to the point—will you have me?”

The laughter died away from Lettice Charteris’ face, and she paled under the fire of his blue eyes. “My—Mr. Valentine—have you considered—have you thought—do you know that I am older than you are?”

“Older—would you call it older? A few months—what is that when you are young—what will it be when we are old? No more than now we are young. I—I loved you the first moment I set eyes upon you, before I knew who you were, when L’Estrange wouldn’t bring me down to call on you because he didn’t know you well enough—he had known you years ago and yet didn’t know you well enough to bring a fellow to see you—Ugh!”

“He hadn’t known me so very well,” said Lettice.

“Oh, I thought he knew you ever so well.”

“No. We knew each other—you know how you know people when you are staying in the same place. As I think I told you before, he was very much taken up with a girl, a pretty girl, he hadn’t many eyes to spare for me.”

“There’s no accounting for the folly of some

men," said John Valentine, with a heart-whole condemnation which only the very young indulge in. "But all this is nothing to do with me—with you and me. What are you going to say to me—Lettice?"

"What can I say to you?"

"Wait a minute," he said. "I've been coming here a good while now. I've seen more of you than one sees of most girls in ordinary society because I've been so much alone with you. Hardly a day has passed but I have spent some part of it in your company. I said just now that I wasn't sure of you. I'm quite sure of one thing, and that is that you care for me. I wasn't quite sure before, but yesterday told me." He bent a little nearer and Lettice flushed a bright scarlet, which faded away leaving her as pale as a lily. "You love me," said John Valentine. And then he kissed her.

It was some time before either of them came back to the nether world again. Then Lettice drew back, and pushed him somewhat feebly and irresolutely away with her slim hands.

"Oh, what have I done," she said, "what will your people say—what will Dick say—what will everybody say."

"I don't know what Dick will say—I suppose what other brothers would say at such a time. I know what my people will say."

"You don't know. Only Lady Lucifer has seen me."

“Only Lady Lucifer counts. ‘Brother and sister have I none,’ as the poet said, or was it the blind beggar of Brighton? I’m so happy I don’t care which. She told me to go in and win. Good old Violet! No, it’s no use your trying to back out of it. You love me, I love you, I adore you, I worship the ground you tread on, worship everything about you, everything you do. Nothing else matters.”

“Don’t you think so—really? I’m afraid—Mr. Valentine—I’m afraid of what I’ve done—”

“Oh, nonsense, you’ll come to it in time.”

“But you don’t know anything about me, my people—I mean my family, I haven’t any people. Dick and I are alone in the world, we haven’t got a single relation. But our father and mother, you must hear all about them before you—let yourself in.”

“Don’t use such horrid language. ‘Let myself in’ indeed, when I’m the happiest man in the three kingdoms—no, in the whole world this night!”

## CHAPTER XI

It was past midnight when John Valentine tore himself away from Lettice; indeed, he would not have gone then had she not been insistent on the point.

"I—want you to go," she said. "No, I'm not at all cruel, I—oh, John—how odd it is to call you John, isn't it?—you don't half realise what has happened to me, you don't understand what my life has been. You think you know me. You only know just a little of me."

"Enough to love," said John Valentine, holding her very close, and looking down into the limpid depths of her lovely eyes.

"I like you so much better, I shall always love you so much better because you took me on trust, as it were; you didn't wait to ask whether it was judicious, whether I knew anything about puddings, and all the still-room arts, and so on; you just took me, myself. But to-night, this wonderful night, I want to be alone, I don't want Dick to come in and see from our faces what has happened, I want to think it all over by myself—don't you understand—to think, to go over it all, to realize what has happened, to sit face to face with

this wonderful new love and get used to it a little before we face the outer world."

"But you want me to tell Charteris? I want all the world to know."

"I read once that when a woman has a love affair that isn't—that isn't—all as it should be, she's never satisfied until she can blazon it forth to the whole world. My dear, that isn't true. I want to have you to myself for a little time, I want to enjoy having a secret with you. I want," and she smiled seraphically up at him, "I want to gloat over the fact that someone who is young and strong and straight and clean and wholesome loves me, and loves me all for my own self."

"But, my child, surely any quantity of men have loved you—why, what made you shudder like that?"

"Oh, did I? I don't know, I'm sure. I'm a bit overdone; I—I thought you liked me, but I didn't know you were going to speak out so soon—what did you say? Men have loved me? A few, or said they did, but not as you do, not one of them as you do, and I——"

She broke off short then, and John Valentine caught her up jealously.

"And you?" he said, still gazing right into her eyes, "and you?"

"I? Oh, you don't understand what my life has been. I—I have never loved anyone before."

"No one?"



"No not anyone, in all my life. Dick? Yes, yes, I'm awfully fond of Dick, he's been such a brick to me, from the very first, right down to now, but he's my brother, it's a different thing. I shan't love him less because I love you more. It's not the same, is it?"

"I don't think so; I've never had a brother, I've never had a sister, but I shouldn't think so. And you have never cared anything for any of the men who have known and loved you?"

"Never."

"Why, what can you have seen in me? But there, I won't put such a silly question to you, the answer could only tell against myself. You love me, you've promised to be my wife, that's enough. I want to go and tell everybody, I want to shove it into every paper, I want every fellow I meet to say, 'Hullo, old chap, wish you luck. Gad, I wish I were in your shoes.'"

"But they wouldn't."

"Half of them would. Still, if you want to keep it dark for a few days, why, it must be as you wish. Nobody has any say in our engagement but you and me, and of the two it is your wishes that are to be considered, not mine. Only you'll not keep me ages waiting? Mind, I have been hanging about, beating about the bush, trying to get up enough courage to put it to the test, and—and I don't see the use of long engagements, I don't see what's to be gained by them. We'll

get a long leave, and we'll go right away, say a yachting tour; or we might take a place up in Scotland for the autumn; or I'll—I'll chuck the Service if you like."

"I don't know what I like to-night," she said, putting her head back a little, "I only know that I want you to go now before Dick comes. I want to be in bed, at least, I want to be safely locked in my own room before he gets home. I want to think things out, I'm all at sea to-night. I can't help it, you know. I feel like a poor prisoner must feel when he's brought out into the sunshine after being shut up in a dark cell for twenty years."

John Valentine held her a little away, and then drew her close to him again.

"I understand better than you think," he said. "It's just the little difference of temperament that has attracted us to each other. You want to have your think out in quiet; I want to shout my news from the house-tops. You wouldn't like it if I wanted to go away and think it all out by myself, and I shouldn't like it if you wanted to shout it from the house-tops. I'll leave you now, and I'll come as soon as I'm free to-morrow afternoon. Give me something of yours to take away with me, something that will make me quite sure when I wake to-morrow morning that it is really true that you are mine; something that will meet my eyes and say to me, gravely and solemnly, 'John Valentine, she loves you.' Not 'She has promised to

be your wife'; not 'You've won her,' but 'She loves you.' "

She was wearing a great single stone emerald ring, set round with diamonds. "I'll give you this," she said, "for a love token."

"Darling," said John Valentine, "I'll give you a ring for every stone in it."

She caught his hand just as she was about to slip it upon his little finger.

"No, I can't give you that—I forgot."

"What did you forget? Why can't you give it to me?"

"No, not that. I'll go and fetch you another, I'll fetch all my rings and you can take your choice."

"But why not this one?" he persisted.

She looked down as if half unwilling to answer.

"You'll think me silly," she said at last, "but green is unlucky. You know what green means in a ring that is given, don't you?"

"No, I didn't know any colour meant anything."

"Green means 'forsaken,'" she said.

"You mean that if you gave me that ring you would forsake me?"

"I don't know. We should forsake each other I think. It's too big a risk, I won't chance it. Look here, blue is a lucky colour between those who love each other. I've got a lovely blue scarab upstairs. I got it when I was in Egypt, I bought

it from an Egyptian woman that I knew a little. She told me it was a lucky ring. She wasn't very willing to part with it because it had been in their family for several generations, but I gave her such a price for it as she had never dreamed of possessing. Yes, it did bring me luck, it took me out of Egypt, it brought me home, it gave me the instinct to come here, and here I met you. I can't do better than give that lucky ring to you for a keepsake and for my remembrance of our betrothal."

"And I," said John Valentine, "will wear it as long as I am alive."

She freed herself from him and went quickly out of the room leaving him with the emerald ring still in his hand.

"I've never worn it since you knew me," she said when she came back a few minutes afterwards, "so nobody will recognize it as being mine. Oddly enough, I can't tell you why, but I had a sort of feeling that I should want it later on."

"But you won't wear this again," he said, holding up the great emerald, which seemed to cast a wicked green eye upon both of them.

"No, no, I won't wear it again, certainly not," she answered, holding out her hand for it. "And yet, I think until I'm married, I would rather wear it. I don't like to discard anything," she went on hurriedly, seeing a question spring to his eye, "that has brought me to you. And now go," she

said, "say 'good-night' to me once again and go."

Five minutes later John Valentine found himself walking slowly along the quiet street. He had declined Charles' offer to whistle for a cab.

"No, Charles, thank you," said he, "I'm going to walk home, it's such a lovely night."

He felt in his waistcoat pocket, and taking out a sovereign, pushed it into Charles' not unwilling hand. Then he walked away, his quiet steps echoing but little along the deserted streets. They *were* quiet footsteps, for John Valentine was treading upon air.

If Lettice Charteris had been in love with him as he stood with his arms around her, and his eyes looking deep down into hers, she would, I think, have been more in love if she had seen his long, athletic form, head well up in air, shoulders well squared, as he walked back to barracks. And when I say back to barracks, I don't mean that he took the most direct road, not a bit of it. On the contrary, he turned his back on the town and walked miles into the quiet country, under the light of the late summer moon, between the sweet smelling hedgerows. It was the first time in his life that John Valentine had communed alone with himself and love.

Have you ever noticed how, under the stress of great emotion, men and women take exactly opposite action? A man who is overcome by great joy

or great sorrow almost invariably wants to get out of the house, to get under the free canopy of heaven, to be under the stars. A woman, on the contrary, under similar circumstances, always seeks sanctuary. And that night, as soon as she heard the door closed behind John Valentine, Lettice Charteris fled, yes, literally fled, to the sanctuary of her own bedroom. Once there she sat herself down to think over what had happened.

The room overlooked the quiet garden, and as she sat at the open window, looking out into the still starlit night, there was positively not a sound to break the thread of her reflections. I think, all the same, had there been a perfect babel of sound, it would not much have affected her at that moment. She had spoken truly when she had told John Valentine that she wanted to think. But her thoughts were more like a tornado than anything else, back over the past, out over the future, lurid storm and brilliant sunshine; and the centre point of all was the young soldier who had just left her, John Valentine.

Now in all this tempest of thought, there was one question of grave import which swayed to and fro in the girl's mind. Ought she, or ought she not, to tell John Valentine every little detail of her past history—well, for the matter of that, every big detail? Her life had not been one of blame, no. Until now she had never had a chance, she had never been mistress of her own

fortunes. She had passed through the fire of affliction, and what by some people would be regarded as a sink of iniquity; and yet she had come out of the fire unscathed, she had come out of the mire unstained.

“Why should I tell him everything,” her thoughts ran, “it wasn’t my fault. I never was made for an idle, loose, blamable life, I have always hated the crooked, I have always wanted to be good, I’ve always hated myself when I’ve had to shut my eyes. Yet if I tell him everything he may draw back, he may go away, leave me, and my chance will be gone. I’ve got a chance now, not of being great, I don’t want that, but of being clean and straight and wholesome, like he is, for the rest of my life. If I ruin myself in his eyes I shall ruin Dick’s chance too; I should have to tell Dick everything, even what he doesn’t know now. I simply can’t do it, I can’t think that there is any obligation why I should explain every detail of the past. He has asked me no questions, he has taken me on trust, I am going to be the best wife that ever was in the world—I—I love him, isn’t that enough? Shall I not give sufficient? Must I abase myself in the eyes of the one man with whom I am most anxious, desperately anxious, to stand well? No, I can’t see it. The old saws we use so often, they’re out of date, they’re obsolete. ‘Honesty is the best policy;’ yes, it’s a wise old saw, but there are many others

that seem to contradict it in such a case as mine. 'What the eye never sees, the heart never grieves for.' That fits my case the better of the two. There's another, 'If speech is silver, silence is gold.' Anyhow, I can't bring myself to tell him that which might lose him to me. If he never knows—he never will know, he never shall know—well, he will never have to fret about it, it will never trouble him. On the other hand, if I—I were to tell him everything, it would always be with him, he would always suspect, he would always be looking for worse than confirmation. No, no, I've kept my own counsel all this time, I'll keep it now in the crisis of my life, and the very fact that I am keeping something back shall make me more careful, more of a wife to Cæsar. And if love will make up for what discretion advises me to do, then John Valentine will be better loved than any other man in all the world."



## CHAPTER XII

WHEN John Valentine woke in the morning the first thing that recalled the truth to him was the sight of the great blue scarab upon his left hand. He was not on duty that day, and it happened that his man had given him ample time to drink the cup of tea that he always brought when he came to wake him. So he laid in his cot and thought of the wonderful new light which had come into his life; the wonderful new glory, yes, that was more the term, glory.

“Gad,” his thoughts ran, “what can she see in me? Oh, I can’t understand it, that such a woman as that should look at a mere lout like me; it’s wonderful! And the best of it is, she loves me, she told me so. There’s no doubt about it when a woman really means she loves you. There are times when she may say she likes a fellow, and there are other times when there can be no mistake about it. There’s no mistake about Lettice. How sweet she was last night! How sweet she always is, but last night even more sweet than usual. What eyes she has, what lovely skin, what a long round throat, what shapely hands!” And to think that it was all his!

He stayed in his cot till the last moment, dressed in a hurry and landed in the mess-room with a quarter of an hour to officers' call. He found himself next to L'Estrange, who was solidly plugging through an excellent breakfast.

"Hullo, Toddy, how's the world a-using of you?" he said, looking up.

"Thank you, Chickweed, pretty well. Sugar please, old chap. Thanks."

As he stretched out his hand to the sugar basin L'Estrange caught the glint of blue upon it.

"Hullo!" he said, "got a new ring?"

"It's not new," said John Valentine.

"Isn't it? Never saw you sport that before. Lord! What a dandy the child is."

"Nothing dandy about this, Chickweed."

"Well, that may be a difference of opinion. Enjoy your dinner last night?"

"Yes, thank you."

John Valentine was singularly uncommunicative, and L'Estrange looked at him sideways.

"Were the other people there?"

"Oh yes. How did you know?"

"Oh, Charteris told me. It was very good of you, old chap."

"Good of me! Why?"

"Well, to go and take his place and leave him free to dine with me."

"Not good of me at all, Chickweed, for I hadn't any thought of you in the matter. Was it a lively evening last night?"

"Not a bit, dead as ditch-water. Charteris was all right, you know. Nice chap, Charteris."

"Oh, devilish nice chap," said John Valentine. "By Jove, there's officers' call," and he choked down the rest of his coffee, caught up his gloves and went clanking out without further ado.

L'Estrange, who was much slower in his movements, followed him more leisurely. "Looks as if he'd got jolly well snubbed last night," his thoughts ran, "and Gad, Miss Lettice can snub when she wants to. Shouldn't be surprised if John hadn't taken things a bit too much for granted. Ah, well, well, one likes a girl better if she's able to hold her own in that way."

So, supremely well satisfied with himself, L'Estrange followed the others in the direction of the orderly room, and it is safe to say that for that morning no thought of Lettice Charteris again entered his head. But he sauntered down to the town all the same that afternoon, while John Valentine was still fuming over work that had to be done ere he was free, and as if by instinct his steps took him to the house where Lettice lived.

"Yes, Miss Charteris was at home," Charles told him, and he found Lettice sitting in the old-world garden, looking lovely in a gown of some soft, white material. She looked up with a smile as he stepped out of the French window from the drawing-room.

"Oh, is that you, Mr. L'Estrange?" she said.

“Why, I haven’t seen you for ages. How are you, how is everybody?”

She meant, “How is John Valentine?” but L’Estrange, not in the least understanding, told her that the health of the regiment was excellent, and sat solemnly down on the chair next to her.

The garden was so still and the summer day so perfect, that he might well have been forgiven had he made the plunge and suggested to her straight away what was hovering in his mind. But before L’Estrange had quite made up his mind that far, and almost before they had got over the first formalities of the conversation, Charles reappeared, convoying some ladies. He saw the quick frown flash over Lettice’s expressive face; saw, but mistook her meaning.

As a matter of fact, it had suddenly dawned upon Lettice that she had been very stupid not to have denied herself to all visitors, seeing that John Valentine would be coming down presently, and would naturally wish to be alone with her. She knew that in time she could get rid of L’Estrange, but once ladies were admitted it would never do to deny others on the chance of these going. They were not interesting although in a way they were distinguished, and under ordinary circumstances Lettice would have been only too glad of their presence. This afternoon she talked and ministered to their comfort with one eye fixed wearily on the clock just visible through the trees in the tall square tower of the cathedral.

A quarter of an hour went by, twenty minutes, half an hour, yet another five minutes. They showed no signs of stirring. "Had they taken roots there?" Lettice's indignant thoughts ran, "Had they taken root, there for the rest of the day?" There were other things going on—Mrs. Blake had a party; she had promised to go—she had no intention of doing so.

At last, in her impatience, she put the question straight to them. "Are you going to Mrs. Blake's afternoon?"

"Oh yes, yes, I suppose so," replied one.

"Oh yes, we promised to go," said the other, "but a little of Mrs. Blake's parties goes a long way. Are you going, Mr. L'Estrange?"

"Oh yes," said L'Estrange, "I'm going presently, not direct from here to there. I have to pay a duty call first."

Then he expatiated a little on the criminal wickedness of the institution known as "duty calls."

At last, however, the two ladies rose from their chairs.

"Well, dear Miss Charteris, we must tear ourselves away. By the way, are you going to Mrs. Blake's party?"

"Yes—yes, I am," she said.

Then they hurried a little, bade adieu in some small confusion, and Lettice followed them to the drawing-room, standing at the window till she

knew they had left the house. Then she went quickly across the drawing-room and called to Charles.

"Not any more visitors, Charles, I'm going out."

"Not *any* more visitors, ma'am?"

"Oh—well—yes, if Mr. Valentine should come, I'll see him."

Then she went back to the garden. L'Estrange got up from his seat as she approached him.

"Are you really going to Mrs. Blake's party?" he asked.

"Oh yes, really."

"I thought from your manner that you didn't really mean going," he said, laughing a little.

"Really! But I must."

"Shall I wait and go with you?"

"No, I shall be ever so long. You had better go and pay your duty call first."

So L'Estrange, having practically no choice, left her. She went as far as the drawing-room window with him also, but instead of going upstairs to put on her hat for the party she went back again to the garden. A few minutes later John Valentine came.

"I hear you are going out," he said.

"How do you know?"

"I met L'Estrange. He said you were dressing for a party and that I shouldn't be admitted. I very nearly turned back."

"That would have been very foolish of you."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not going. I'm very stupid, John."

"Impossible!"

"Not at all; I do the most silly things sometimes, so silly that I could break my own head times without number."

"You wouldn't like me to think that."

"No, perhaps not, and yet it's true."

"And what have you been doing particularly silly this morning?"

"Well, I went out."

"There wasn't anything silly in that."

"No, no, I'm not saying there was. And then I came in and ate my lunch."

"I don't see anything out of the ordinary in that."

"Oh no, I was quite sane at lunch. Then I talked to Dick, heard what he was doing this afternoon, and after that I went and changed my dress—do you like my dress?"

"I do. But where is the particular silliness?"

"Well, then I came down here to wait for you—and I forgot to tell Charles I wasn't at home. First of all Mr. L'Estrange came, then Mrs. Lovelace and Miss Malevereux came, and they stayed and stayed till I thought they were going to take root here. And then when they'd gone, Mr. L'Estrange offered to go to the party with me."

"The deuce he did."

"Oh, that was all right, only I had to get rid of them by saying I was going to the party, and I didn't like to give myself away to him. Then I went into the house and told Charles to deny me to everyone—nearly to you."

"Oh, nonsense."

"Do you know, I think Charles thought so too, for he asked me in such a queer voice if I was to be out to *everyone*. And I said in quite a casual tone, 'Oh, if Mr. Valentine comes—I'll see him.'"

"I suppose he knows how things are between us, they generally do. Oh, Charles is a great friend of mine. Charles and I have a great respect for one another. And here he is with a fresh supply of tea."

"Well, I'll give you tea—John, and then we'll go into my own little room and have a big talk."

"I suppose you haven't changed your mind during the hours of reflection?" he said as Charles disappeared through the drawing-room window.

Lettice cast an adorable glance at him. "Do you take sugar?"

"Three lumps, please."

"I've never given you more than one," she said.

"Until last night," corrected John Valentine.

"Well," she said, "as long as you find it sugar and not saccharine, it's all right. Do you really want three lumps?"

"Yes."



"But you don't usually take three lumps?"

"No, but I'm going to to-day by way of celebrating the event."

"Then I shall only give you one," she said, putting the sugar tongs back with a determined air.

"I see," said John Valentine, "that you are going to rule me with a rod of iron."

"I don't think so," said Lettice, "I think it's more likely to be the other way. You know you only take one lump, sir."

"I know that I would take all I could get from you."

"You wait a bit," she said. "I won't surfeit you with material sugar, that would be a foolish game."

"I've brought you some rings. I needn't tell you that my new acquisition was spotted this morning. I said in a casual way that it wasn't a new one, and the semi-lie served its purpose. I can't get you such rings as I would like down here. These will do until we find ourselves in London, or until Simpson can send to town for some more worthy of your choice."

"I'd like to see them now," said Lettice.

"Won't you wait till we get indoors?"

"No, I want to see them now, this very minute."

And so John Valentine felt in the breast pocket of his tweed coat and brought forth a flat parcel done up in white paper.

“I thought they were rather nice, these,” he said, putting the little parcel into her hand. “At all events, although they’re not good enough for you, they’re the best I could get. I would have sent to London only I wanted to see you with a ring of mine on your hand.”

“My fetters,” said Lettice as she untied the string.

## CHAPTER XIII

FOR a whole delicious week Lettice Charteris remained in possession of her secret. Then she broke the news herself to her brother.

It happened that evening that John Valentine and another man of his regiment with whom Dick had set up rather a friendship had been dining with them, and when Dick Charteris had seen them leave, he came back into the drawing-room, where Lettice was still sitting, and helped himself to a fresh cigarette.

"Nice chaps those are," he said as he struck a match.

Lettice looked up swiftly. "Dick," she said, "I've something to tell you."

"Um?" he said, his attention fixed on his cigarette.

"I don't know what you'll say—I'm—I'm going to be married."

"What!" His tone was sharp and staccato with astonishment.

"I'm so awfully happy, Dick."

"L'Estrange?" said Dick.

"No. Mr. L'Estrange and I were very good friends, nothing more; we never could have been

anything more, that was out of the question from the first."

"I don't know so much about that."

"Why—what do you mean?"

"Oh nothing, nothing."

"But you must have meant something."

"Well, from what L'Estrange has let drop to me, I should have thought he took more than a lively interest in you."

"Mr. L'Estrange? Oh no, it's John Valentine who takes an interest in me."

"John Valentine! You mean to say you're—you're going to marry John Valentine?"

"I hope so."

"Good life!"

He stood staring at her for a moment, and Lettice stretched out a hand to him.

"Aren't you going to wish me joy, Dick?"

He seemed to come back to himself as with a start, then dropped down upon the couch beside her and, putting his arm round her, drew her close to him.

"Wish you joy? That I will," he said earnestly. "You've had a rough time in the past, old girl, now everything's going to be different."

"Everything has been different since you came and rescued me," she said, leaning her head against his shoulder and speaking in a deep thrilling voice. "Don't let's talk about it, Dick, not about that part of it, it's all to be dead and buried

and forgotten. I wasn't over happy at the convent, at the same time I wasn't actively wretched. The Good Sisters were narrow and none too good, but they weren't actively wicked, nobody could say that. If they couldn't understand what the young things they were educating felt, well, it wasn't their fault; they did their best according to their lights. That was my childhood. This is my womanhood, and it began when you and I left Cairo together."

For a few seconds Dick Charteris did not speak. Then he said, looking away from Lettice and into the fire, "You're—you're going to bury the past? You're not going to be foolish and explain too much?"

"I am going to explain nothing," said Lettice; "I've thought that all out long ago. Perhaps it would be more honest, but in this case I don't think that honesty is the best policy. You can always find a proverb to fit every *nuance* of life."

"Why cry stinking fish?" said Dick thoughtfully.

"Yes, yes, that must have been what I had in my mind. If I had been willing, if I had understood what I was doing—then everything would have been different. But the Sisters, they taught one nothing—worse than nothing, and when I ran away from the convent I knew no more of the world, I knew no more of life than this table. If ever I have any children, Dick, they shall never

go into a convent, never. Of course, the girls who were free and lived at home, and just came for lessons, they had a good time—no, I don't mean a good time, but they had sense enough, the *externes*, but the *internes*—oh, poor things! I was one of them, a pitiful example."

"Well, well, that's as may be," said he. "It's no good going over that, poor old girl. You did a foolish thing and you paid for it; I don't see that there's any more to be said about it, between us, at all events. I don't see why you need take another into the secret. 'The least said the soonest mended'—there's a lot of wisdom in it."

"And it wasn't," repeated Lettice, "as if I had known what I was doing. I—I've thought it all out, Dick, dozens of times. Anyway, I'll run the risk."

So after this the engagement gradually crept out in Blankhampton. John Valentine, indeed, announced the fact in the mess-room on the following evening, and received the congratulations, warm and hearty, of his brother officers.

It happened that L'Estrange was staying away for a couple of days, and came back the next morning to hear what had transpired.

His heart gave a sick sort of throb as he realized that John Valentine, a mere youngster, as he thought of him, had gone in and won the prize that he had cast an eye upon for himself.

"Well," his thoughts ran, "he had let prudential considerations influence him, a fatal error, and another had stepped in and snatched the prize." Well, it was the fortune of war; it was no use crying over spilt milk, no use letting anyone know that he had ever thought of Lettice Charteris as a possible wife for himself. So, it was all over, he had dreamed a dream, and had gone on dreaming when he ought to have been up and doing.

"Serves me right," he said to himself, "and now I'll have to go and tell John Valentine that I hope he'll be awfully happy. I suppose I'll have to be best man and give the bride a diamond brooch, and John Valentine a big silver bowl and—oh, damn!"

Well, human nature is human nature all the world over, and it was clearly borne in upon L'Estrange that he had nobody to blame but himself, and that it was therefore no good crying over spilt milk. He went to meet John Valentine as soon as he saw that young man come across the barrack square.

"Well, young fellow," he said, "I hear news of you."

"Yes," said John Valentine in his most cheery tones.

"So you've captured the fair Lettice. You're a deuced lucky chap. I had more than half an eye to her myself."

"Oh, had you. Well, I'm awfully sorry, old

fellow, because I daresay you'd have made her a much better husband than me. You should have been a bit sprier. It's a great thing to make up your mind and work to it, eh?"

"The greatest thing in the world," said L'Estrange, "and I congratulate you on having done it. I hope you'll be very happy, old fellow, and that she'll be happy too."

"You'll see me through the business, won't you?" said John Valentine, looking up with his honest eyes. "You're the best friend I've got and have been ever since I've been in the regiment, and I'd like to feel afterwards that when I went up for execution that you saw me through the business."

"Oh, certainly," said L'Estrange, "I shall be delighted, particularly as I had an eye to the lady myself."

At this John Valentine laughed as if his comrade had perpetrated the funniest joke in the world.

"And," said L'Estrange to himself as they turned towards the mess-room, "there's many a true word spoken in jest."

It must be confessed that after this life fell a little flat to L'Estrange. He could not go to the house in Little Ogledal as he had done before. He was just as welcome, Lettice smiled upon him just the same, and Dick, who was convinced of the truth of what he had said to his sister, was kindness itself to him. But somehow things were different.



It is, you know, not quite the same thing when a man goes to a house as a possible husband in time to come, to when he goes only in the capacity of best man.

But John Valentine was gloriously happy.

"We won't leave the old regiment," he said to Lettice, "not yet at all events. In time to come—oh, well, we can't tell. After all, it's a glorious life when you're young and happy and have plenty of money. Only if you feel differently, dearest, you must tell me, because so long as you are with me I shall be happy wherever I am."

"I wonder," said Lettice, with a curious thrill in her voice, "if you'll always feel like that."

"Always? Of course. There's only one thing I feel very strongly about just now. I don't care whether we stay in the Service or whether we leave it, I don't care whether we live in a furnished house or cart our furniture about, or put up in lodgings or live in barracks. But there's one thing I do mind, that I don't want to be kept waiting. I always think it's such a barbarous thing. Why, I've known people engaged for six months! Always thought myself," he added sapiently, "that a man who would wait six months for a woman he wanted to marry—oh, well, he would deserve all he got."

"You don't want to wait six months?"

"No, I don't. But I suppose if you make me, I shall have to. But I should hate it, we shouldn't have half as good a chance of being happy as if

we were married straight off, before anything——”

“ Came between us? ” said Lettice.

“ Well, I didn’t mean that, because nothing on earth could come between us, but somebody might die, or I might break my neck, or you might get small-pox—oh, a great many things might happen.”

“ I must get a gown to be married in,” said Lettice, “ I must get a gown to go away in, and there are one or two things that I might like to have to wear on the honeymoon.”

“ But you can get those in a month.”

“ In a month! You don’t know much about dressmakers, John. I’ve made arrangements to go to London with Dick the day after to-morrow, and I am going to see my clothes’ people and I will get them to make what haste there is in them. It’s not such a busy time of the year, and perhaps as I’m a considerate customer in a general way, they will condescend to hurry up and make me presentable for starting on our travels.”

“ The day after to-morrow,” said he. “ Well, I might get leave and go along, I don’t see why I shouldn’t. At all events, I can try it on, because I shall want wedding garments—and I can’t get ’em in Blankhampton.”

“ You must work the oracle,” said Lettice smiling at him.

And John Valentine did work the oracle to such good purpose that when, two days later, the brother

and sister went to London for ten days, John Valentine went with them. Oh what a time they had! What a lot of money he spent! And, for the matter of that, what a lot of money they both spent. It seemed as if John Valentine could not shower enough upon his beautiful fiancée.

One day they ran against Lady Lucifer, who was passing through town on her way from one country house to another.

"Why, my dears," she said, "I am delighted to see you, I had no idea you were in town. What are you doing to-night?"

"Oh, just the ordinary things," said John Valentine, answering for them both.

"Then you must come and dine with me—oh, I'm alone, not at the house, I am at the Carlton. Come and dine with me, and we'll do a theatre afterwards. It's practically an off time in the year, so we can settle about our seats when we meet. I want to hear all about it, I want a long talk. We'll go to something where we needn't harrow our feelings. By the bye, of course your brother is with you?"

"Oh yes, yes, Dick is up too," said Lettice, blushing a little.

"Oh, then you'll bring him along?"

"Dear Lady Lucifer," said Lettice, "it's nearly lunch-time now, and I haven't the least idea whether we shall see Dick till dinner-time, if then. You see, he—he has left us to go our way very much as we like."

“Of course, of course, my dear,” said Lady Lucifer, “what would you have him do? Hang about you and play gooseberry? How shocking. Well, we’ll leave it so; if he can come, all well and good; if he can’t, I shan’t at all feel that I am playing gooseberry to you two dear things. By the way, I’d better buy your wedding present while I am in town. If you can spare me an hour to-morrow morning before I go away, we’ll go and buy it together. I should like to give you something that you will really value. Now, I’m quite conscientious about wedding presents, I always try to get inside the minds of the bride and bridegroom, and give them something they really want. Now, I’ve been staying with Lady Sakesnumdham—nice woman, my dear, nice woman, at least, she has that reputation and rather plays up to it. She says, ‘Ah, it’s So-and-So’s birthday, or So-and-So’s wedding, I must send some little recognition.’ She sent two little recognitions while I was staying there. If you believe me, that woman keeps a store cupboard for making presents out of. When she comes across one of those cheap jeweller’s shops that come up, like a mushroom in a single night, she goes in and buys cheap flashy jewellery. She says, ‘I must buy that, it will make some young thing so happy.’ No thought of buying something to suit the young thing’s particular taste, but something flashy—and something that will not make too deep a hole in her purse. Now,

I always go into a shop and try to put myself into the mind of the young thing, or the elderly thing, who is going to be married. I have just been buying a wedding present. The doctor's daughter at Matcham is going to marry a curate. She's a nice little thing and he's a nice boy who ought never to have gone into the Church. I am going to get Lord Lucifer to give him a living."

"And what are you going to give them?"

"My dear, I'm not going to give them a pickle fork; I hate people who give brides pickle forks. Now I was talking to dear old Lady Vivian only the other day, for as you know, Ingleby isn't very far from Matcham. It's her curate who's marrying our doctor's daughter. She said, 'Well, my dear, I shall give them a nice set of plain teaspoons.' Just like Lady Vivian! It's a wonder she didn't offer to give her a set of 'undies,' all hand made and trimmed with good serviceable Broderie Anglaise. Can't you see dear Lady Vivian making them?"

"Well, but what are you giving her?"

"My dear, I've bought the poor child the most frivolous pair of ear-rings I ever beheld in my life. She's a pretty little thing and she has a taste for ear-rings. Now, Lady Vivian would say it was most improper and that she ought to set an example to the village girls and so on. I look at it quite differently. She's young, she's pretty, she's come out of a comfortable, hard-working home, full of

brothers and sisters, and little Marjorie has done more than her share. I'm going to make Lord Lucifer give them a good living, and I'm going to give her these ear-rings."

She took a case from her smart bag of gold network, with flashing jewels upon the clasp, and opened it so that Lettice could just look within.

"Aren't they sweet?" she said.

"Oh, charming," said Lettice. "A very handsome present."

"Oh, well, turquoises are not extravagant things to buy, and think how that little girl will enjoy wearing these! She won't be thinking all the time, 'Oh, I mustn't enjoy this because I'm a parson's wife.' I know perfectly well that when I go home and see Lady Vivian's teaspoons they will be good and solid, like her sweet self; they will be the good old-fashioned kind that tumbles out of your saucer and makes a splodge in the middle of your frock, just where it shows most. She'll have pickle forks, and plated things for strawberries and cream with a little pot in the middle for the cream, but she won't have any more turquoise ear-rings—I know."

"Yes," said Lettice, "you know."

## CHAPTER XIV

AT the end of their visit to London the betrothed pair went back, naturally, to Blankhampton. What a time they had ! One might have imagined that the Blankhampton folk would have been at least luke-warm concerning the marriage of comparative strangers. But, as it happened, they were nothing of the kind. If anyone felt any heartburnings that another good match had fallen to a daughter of Heth nobody said anything, and everybody flocked to call upon Lettice and offer their congratulations.

She was *very* busy. She had to spend a few days with Lady Lucifer. Perhaps these visits to Matcham in some way accounted for the geniality with which the news of the approaching marriage had been received.

Lady Lucifer was exceedingly kind to Lettice ; she liked her personally, and the little Lady of Matcham, for all her air of frivolity and her sharp, inconsequent tongue, was a very loyal friend where she chose to give her friendship ; moreover, everybody knew it.

"Lettice dear," she said at luncheon on the second day of her visit, "are you free this afternoon?"

"Oh yes, quite free. John is on duty to-day."

"Then you might come out with me. I'm going to have tea with a very old friend of mine from Australia, she's such a dear little woman, you'll like her awfully. She's got her sister-in-law staying with her, a girl I knew before she was married and of whom I am particularly fond. Of course, I knew Stephen Howard years ago in Australia, just as I knew his sister, and delighted I was when he married this girl. They were very happy for a time, and then—something happened, he seemed to get ill all at once, I never knew why, I'd never known him ill, he was always in the pink of health. Anyhow, they went away without even coming down to say 'good-bye'—at a week's notice, you know—and they've been touring about on a yacht for years and years, and they've got a sweet and lovely baby—about two years old—and they've not been back since it was born."

"I should love to go. I'm sure I should like anyone you like, dear Lady Lucifer."

"Would you? Then you'll like very few. You know, I never feel like that. I like people because *I* like them, myself, and for no other reason."

"I like few people," said Lettice, "because I have never known many people. When a girl



is educated in a convent, as I was, her friends are very few, her acquaintances almost none. Then when Dick and I got free of Chancery, we took our fill of travelling. That doesn't make for a large acquaintance."

"No, no, I suppose not."

"At least, it didn't in our case. I don't foregather with people, Lady Lucifer. Dick does a bit, but he never wants me to know any of his chance friends."

"My dear, you can't be too exclusive," said Lady Lucifer, speaking in most positive tones. "People have an idea that I'm not exclusive. My goodness! I once heard a woman at a bazaar say to a girl who couldn't get something off, 'Go and ask dear little Lady Lucifer to take some chances, she's so good-natured.' *Me*, my dear! Why, I suppose I'm one of the least good-natured women in England."

"Oh, I think not, Lady Lucifer."

"My dear, it's true."

"Oh no."

"Oh, I have a pleasant manner, a very pleasant manner—when I like—and when I'm in Blankhampton or Idleminster I stop and shake hands with people that I would no more think of asking inside my house than I would think of flying. I daresay we shall all be flying in a little while, but as yet we haven't got to that, so I can still stick to my favourite metaphor. By the way, Lettice, haven't you *any* relations?"

"No," said Lettice, "I haven't any relations at all."

"I thought perhaps," Lady Lucifer went on, "that you were one of the Charteris' of Drumlochiel?"

"No," said Lettice, "my father was an Irishman."

"Oh! One of the Roscommon family, no doubt."

"I don't know," said Lettice. "I only know that my father was born and brought up in Ireland at a place called Nugent. I don't know where Nugent is, I only know that it is the name of the house my father was born in. I never came to England, never was in England till—well, till quite the other day. I was born abroad, educated abroad, my father lived and died abroad. If he had relations he never talked about them, never told us anything about them. He left us wards in Chancery, that's all I know about it. I really know very few people, somehow I haven't the faculty of foregathering with strangers, picking people up and that sort of thing. I've seen girls do it in hotels on the Continent, particularly in the South. I've seen a girl come in and give a shy look round—you know the kind of girl I mean, nice fair hair, nice white frock, pretty blue ribbons—and somehow the next day you'd see her figuring along with a couple of scalps beside her. I never was able to do it."

"No, no, I know the type of girl you mean. You're quite different. Then you won't be having a lot of relations for the wedding?"

"Dear Lady Lucifer," said Lettice, "I shall have my brother. I haven't got another relation in the world."

"Well, I don't know that you're not lucky. I am one of a huge family. I believe I have more cousins and aunts and sisters-in-law and grandfathers and grandmothers than any woman that ever lived. It's a most expensive luxury, I assure you, and when I give a party in London it seems to consist of people belonging to me. And they're so difficult—or would be if I had not, when I married Lord Lucifer, set down a line of my own. I just said to an aunt of mine who was inclined to give herself enormous airs, 'Look here, you'll please forget that I'm your niece, and you'll please remember that I'm Lord Lucifer's wife first.' My husband thought I was rather hard; he just grumbled at me a little bit for making, what he called, a bogey of him. But since he had seen how that old lady has victimised my sisters he has said many a time that it is a pity they haven't got my far-seeing, shrewd common sense. Then you'll go with me this afternoon and see my dear little Mrs. Bob Markham?"

"I shall be delighted to."

So very soon after lunch Lettice found herself driving away down the East Avenue from

Matcham beside Lady Lucifer, their destination being the Manor Lodge, where Mr. and Mrs. Bob Markham lived. Lady Lucifer, who was an excellent whip, was driving the smartest of phaetons with a spanking pair, which did not, however, prevent her from chatting comfortably to Lettice as they went.

She did not again touch on the subject of Lettice's family, although she talked a good deal of John Valentine himself. And then when they got to the Manor Lodge, Lettice found herself in an atmosphere of comfortable intimacy in which it seemed impossible that she could ever feel herself a stranger.

"My dear Juie," cried Lady Lucifer when she had kissed Mrs. Bob on either cheek, "I am so delighted and overjoyed to see you."

"How kind of you, Lady Lucifer," said the lady whom she had thus addressed. Lettice saw that she was a rather pretty woman, very smart in her appearance.

"How could you have the heart," said Lady Lucifer, "to keep away from us so long is beyond me. As to Stephen being ill—nonsense, there was never anything the matter with Stephen in this world. I believe myself, and always have believed, that you got sick of the world, you were so spooney on each other."

"Stephen was ill, very ill—at least, Sir Fergus Tiffany said so, and he isn't an alarmist as you know, particularly where men are concerned."

"But Stephen is all right now?"

"Of course."

"But I am forgetting my duty. Forgive me, Maimie. This is Miss Charteris, who is engaged to my cousin, John Valentine. Engaged did I say? Why, they are going to be married the day after to-morrow."

"Why, you haven't asked us to the wedding, or is it not going to be from Matcham?"

"Oh, the day after to-morrow—that was only a *façon de parler*, they are going to be married next month or sometime. You'll get an invitation, never fear."

"That's all right," said Mrs. Bob. "Oh yes, I've met Mr. Valentine, indeed, he has dined with us here more than once, and I am delighted to make Miss Charteris' acquaintance. I always like to hear of young people being married."

"Ah, Maimie, you've helped a few matches on in your time."

"Yes, I'm afraid I have—I'm afraid I have. No, you needn't look at Juie, I hadn't any hand in hers beyond the fact that I existed and that Juie came here with her mother to call upon us. Stephen made up his mind before he had been in the room ten minutes. I never saw such a complete case of bowled over in my life. And the best of it is I believe that they are both in the same mind to-day."

"Oh, that's all right," said Lady Lucifer.

"And I hear you've got a baby—oh yes, Maimie has kept me informed, but seeing's believing, you know, and I'd like to see that baby, if you've no objection."

"You may certainly see her," said Mrs. Howard laughing outright, "we're not ashamed of her I can assure you."

"Ashamed! I should think not. What did you call her?"

"We called her Madge Violet."

"Oh really! Well, it isn't a bad name, Violet. But you know, Juie, you ought to have had a boy while you were about it."

"Oh, I don't know," said the other, "we're quite satisfied with our girl."

When the child came in it occurred to Lettice that her mother might well say she was quite satisfied, for surely a lovelier child never could have been found anywhere.

"Oh, you darling," cried Lady Lucifer, "come here and see me. Do you know, I adore little girls."

"Not a little dirl," said the child wrathfully.

"No, a very, very big girl. Do you know I knew your mother years and years ago, and I knew your father——"

"Got no father," said the mite.

"Got no father! What *does* she mean?"

"I'm afraid she doesn't know what 'father' means," said Mrs. Howard. "She calls her father Stevie—just as I do."

"Oh, very nice, very nice. I always wished my children would call me Violet, but they never would. I don't know why, but I think there's something so quaint in children calling their father and mother 'John' and 'Mary'—just as it ought to be. Why, I might as well call Lord Lucifer 'husband.'"

"I have known a man call his wife 'wife,'" said Mrs. Bob.

"Ah, that's the kind of man who always calls his wife 'my dear' in a threatening tone. I said to Lord Lucifer the other day, 'How dare you call me 'my dear?' Take my advice, Lettice, and never let John do it. He will, they all do, they call you all sorts of pretty names when everything's smooth, but when things go wrong, they call you 'my dear' in a way that's a positive insult."

"I'll be very severe about it," said Lettice.

"Yes, mind you are. And so, little lady, you didn't understand when I said I had known your father that I meant—er, Stevie? Well, I knew Stevie when he wasn't much older than you, and when Stevie comes in you'll see him kiss me."

"Me first," said the dot.

"Yes, I expect it is always a case of you first, and so it ought to be, you darling."

Madge looked back at her mother. "Pity lady," she said in her shrill child's voice, "very pity lady."

They stayed at the Manor Lodge until, as Lettice declared, they would have to scamper to get back in time for dinner.

“My dear,” she said, as they drove away down the quiet country road, “I’ve never been so puzzled in my life. That girl practically hadn’t a penny—well, her mother had a nice little house in Blankhampton—was in the Cathedral set, knew the people at the barracks—she was quite nice. The younger sister married Sir Anthony Staunton, and the young cousin married Lord Ceespring, he was Marcus Orford then, but they were both very pretty girls. This one wasn’t pretty, not at all, but Stephen Howard was awfully well off, very good looking, charming in every way. He saw her, fell in love with her and married her right out of hand. He adores her, they have everything to make them happy, even this charming little child, and yet there is a look on her face that I don’t understand. It’s not as if they were wretched, it’s not as if they were poor. She has a look on her face as if she were expecting something—something dreadful. I wonder if it was really quite true that there was something wrong with Stephen Howard’s lungs! I never thought so before, I always thought it was an excuse for getting away.”



## CHAPTER XV

WITH every day that went over his head, the toils of love became more and more firmly welded about John Valentine's heart. So entirely over head and ears in love was he that his appearance was very soon a signal for a general stampede on the part of his brother officers.

"By George! I am a lucky chap," was his way of beginning a dissertation on the perfections of Lettice Charteris.

"You *are* a lucky chap," said one long-suffering officer, Sir William O'Gorman. "You are a lucky chap, I quite agree with you, Toddy, but God knows one can't say the same for Miss Charteris."

"Why not?"

"Oh, my dear chap, if you going to bore her with telling her how lucky you are, and how you ought to go down on your knees on every little heap of mud you come across and send up a pæan of thanksgiving for having had such luck, she will get as sick of you as we are. I know all about Miss Charteris, and I've ordered you a charming wedding present, one that she'll appreciate, so get out of my rooms."

“ You brute ! ” said John Valentine in his good-natured, imperturbable tones. “ You don’t understand what a man feels like when he’s engaged to a woman who’s good and charming and beautiful.”

“ I know all about Miss Charteris, I know all about her fine skin and her lovely eyes and her chestnut hair, I know all about her French and Italian and her singing and her housewifery, and how she gets Paquin frocks from a little woman who costs tuppence—don’t tell me. I saw her coming out of Paquin’s the last time I was in town, so get out.”

A few minutes later John Valentine found himself walking down the echoing corridor. He was on his way to the town, indeed, he had only looked in at his comrade’s rooms to borrow a clean handkerchief, something mysterious having happened to his own stock of those necessary articles. And as he pursued his way down the stairs and across the square he found himself busily thinking. After all, he had heard her say that she got her clothes made by a little French woman, and sure enough, to the great house in the Petticoat Lane of Mayfair she had certainly gone for her daily fittings on. It puzzled him very much.

“ I say, Lettice, dearest,” he said as soon as he found himself in the pretty drawing-room in Little Ogleadal, “ are you getting your trousseau at Paquin’s ? ”

“ Some of my frocks, yes.”

"But you haven't gone there before?"

"Always."

"But I thought you got your things of a little French woman?"

Lettice laughed. "Yes, I do, but she's a little French woman at Paquin's."

"Why don't you tell people you get your clothes at Paquin's?"

"Oh, my dear, half of them wouldn't believe me, and the other half would think there was something—— You see, I have a good bit of money, of course you know that from Dick, and although I've always dressed so simply, at the same time, I've always got my clothes from a good place."

"Yes, exactly, but I don't see why you don't tell people where you get your clothes."

"It isn't any business of anyone else's, John."

"No, but why make a mystery of it?"

"I—you don't understand women. When I'm married I shall say at once that I get my clothes from Paquin's, but before I am married—well, most people would think it side, or else—er—that it was a lie."

"Oh—I didn't know women were like that. I hate lies, I hate mystery."

Their conversation passed into other channels, but while she talked, Lettice Charteris made up her mind that she had done the right thing in letting the dead past bury its dead. Whatever she was to be to John Valentine in the future, after

all, she argued to herself, she had lived her own life in the past; not one word would she ever breathe that would in any way tell John Valentine too much."

"He's like all that type," she said to herself as she listened to his rhapsodies about the time to come, "good, honest, straight, clean, wholesome, all that is most attractive to me, and yet they are always just a tiny bit prejudiced. Well, there is always something, one has always to pay the price, and I've got the man that my soul has always longed for, honest, upright, clean, wholesome. One can't have everything."

So the opportunity went over, and Lettice was more fixed in her mind than ever that she would go on as she had begun.

They decided that they would not take another house in Blankhampton, but would make one establishment along with Dick at the house in Little Ogledal.

"It's more Lettice's house than mine," said Dick when he was consulted on the subject, and I really don't know what I shall do when you get moved on somewhere. I can't imagine myself running a house without Lettice, and I don't know that I shall try to do it when she's married."

"You will be marrying yourself," said John Valentine, who at that time could not imagine any man able to marry not doing so.

"Very likely. At all events you won't get

moved on just yet awhile, and I shall have time to think about things later on. I want to go abroad for a time, and I want to see something more of London. In fact, I've a dozen things I want to do, and I certainly shall not be very much with you. Oh, you needn't pull a long face, you'll get on very well without me."

"You must not think," said John Valentine, "that you need get out of our road."

"I've always thought that married people ought to be alone together, but I shall be very glad to make your house my home from time to time, if you will allow me to. In fact, I think this had better be Lettice's establishment as long as you want to live in Blankhampton. I've stuck to the place pretty closely because Lettice was happy here and liked it, but I shall not be at all sorry to get away for a little change."

"You haven't been bored, Dick?" said Lettice, who felt suddenly as if she had been frightfully selfish.

"Bored? Not at all. But, you know, I've knocked about a lot in my time, and there's a certain feeling that gets into the brains of people of my nomadic bringing up, I think the Germans call it *Wanderjahr*. That is why I am so supremely satisfied that Lettice should be marrying a soldier. She's been so happy in her home at Blankhampton, but I expect the day would have come before long when she would say, 'Dick, I must get out

of this, I can't stand sitting in one place month after month any longer.' I went to see a man the other day about a horse, and he took me in to tea with his wife—charming place, very charming and pleasant wife. She asked me if I had got over the move. 'What move?' said I. 'Oh, you've not been very long in Blankhampton my husband tells me,' she replied. 'Oh, that's true, we've only been here a few months,' I said, 'but we bought the house practically as it stood, and we were settled in a couple of days.' 'Then,' she said, 'you're accustomed to moving about?' 'Yes, my sister and I have moved about a good deal.' 'Ah,' said she, 'I can't understand people being happy and satisfied to move about like that, but you see, my great-great-grandfather built the house that I was born in and was married from, and when I was married I came here, so I have only known two homes in all my life.' 'But you've been away?' 'No,' she said, 'I've scarcely been away at all since we were married.' And as they had grown-up daughters," Dick concluded, "I imagine that they had been married for some time."

"Oh, that type's very common in the country," said John Valentine, "I've known a man who was thoroughly proud of the fact that he slept in the same bed that he was born in, and that he intended to die in it, by Jove, he did! He told me so at least twenty times. And then he was killed in the

hunting field. I was there, poor old chap. He opened his eyes and said, 'Just get me back to my own bed, there's good fellows,' and the next minute he was as dead as a door nail. I often think of it," he went on, "as showing the futility of making arrangements too far ahead. Now, it won't make the least difference to me where and when and how I take my departure out of this vale of tears—not that I find it a vale of tears just now," he added, turning quickly to Lettice, "or ever did, for that matter. It's the regular thing to call it, that's all."

So they settled the great question as to the immediate future, and if the truth be told, Dick Charteris made arrangements to go away for an indefinite period with as light a heart as any young man of fortune ever set out upon his travels. To this end he sold off his horses—John Valentine taking the first pick of them—and bruited it well abroad that the bride and groom would come back to the house in Little Ogledal after their honeymoon.

"I hear," said L'Estrange to Lettice one afternoon when he was paying one of his rare calls upon her, "that after the honeymoon John Valentine is going to hang up his hat here."

"For the time," said Lettice, "yes. You see, Dick has been so long with me, sacrificing himself for me because I was so anxious to have a home of my own, that now the poor boy is taking very

kindly to the idea of seeing the world quite on his own. And you know, Mr. L'Estrange, I do consider my brother a most wonderful person. He has never once grumbled, or said he was dull, or suggested moving, or anything."

"But you haven't been here so long," said L'Estrange.

"Haven't we? But it seems a long time. You see, I never seem to have lived before, I never had a home of my own before this one," and she looked round as a woman does look at a place wherein she loves every stick and stone. "I always knew Dick was a good sort; a girl doesn't always say that of her brother you know, but I never knew it as I know it to-day."

"I think Charteris is a good sort," said L'Estrange, "I've always thought so."

"Yes, but he isn't your brother, and that makes all the difference. Most girls find their brothers so awfully uninteresting. I never did. Dick has always suited me down to the ground, we've never bored each other—at least, he's never bored me, and if I have ever bored him he has never let me see it. But then you see, we never lived together till now."

"What?"

"We never lived together till now—but I've explained all that to you before."

"But I thought you had travelled together."

"Oh yes, we've travelled about and lived in



hotels, but we've never lived in a house till now, and the wonderful thing is that Dick hasn't been bored to death, for," with a quick sharp sigh, "until I came on the scene Dick was always free, free to do as he would, go where he would, think as he liked, live as he liked—in fact, live his own life."

"But surely you had a home when you were a child?"

"In hotels, yes; in a house, never."

"It seems incredible," said L'Estrange.

The familiar feeling about her was on him more strongly than ever. Where had he seen her before? Where had he stood quite close to her as he did just now and looked down upon her? Oh, how odd it was! So near and yet so far, so awfully familiar and yet so far away.

"Miss Charteris," he said at last, "do you believe in the transmigration of souls? Did you ever live before?"

"I don't know," she said shortly. "Sometimes I think I have, at others I feel doubtful, and then again I'm perfectly certain that I never have. Why? What makes you ask?"

"Because I have a feeling that I stood somewhere talking to you just as we are now, I standing up and you sitting rather low down. Do you remember it? Where was it?"

"I don't know," said Lettice, "I don't know, I haven't the least idea. In Cairo I suppose."

"I haven't quite that remembrance of Cairo," said he, not liking to say outright that he hadn't any remembrance of Cairo whatsoever. "I feel as if it were not in the world at all. Do you feel that? Do you know anything of the theory of the transmigration of souls?"

"Nothing," said Lettice, "nothing; I think it's uncanny. I haven't any remembrance, I'm happy in to-day, I forget what happened yesterday altogether."

"Are you sure?" he said, driving his point home.

"Quite sure, quite sure. There never was a yesterday so far as I am concerned."

"Do you know," said L'Estrange slowly, "it's puzzled me for a long time, but I begin to think—there—was, there—was!"

## CHAPTER XVI

As quickly as he could make a decent excuse, L'Estrange got himself away from the house in Little Ogledal. He did not go, as was his custom at that hour, to the club, but hied him straight back to barracks, and seeking his own quarters, he locked the door and set himself to think things out.

He was sorry, very sorry. He was unusually fond of John Valentine, and had been his friend ever since he had first joined the regiment fresh from Sandhurst. Yes, he was sorry, for in that flash had come back to him the knowledge of how and when and where he had seen Lettice Charteris before he met her at her own house in Little Ogledal. Of course! And it had puzzled him so long—so long. It was the attitude that had given him the clue, the way she had looked up from her low seat at him where he stood with his back to the fire. The scene had been very different.

He remembered riding out to the pyramids one afternoon alone, and coming across a beautiful English woman dressed in white, very simply, with a big shady hat upon her head. Oh, how

well he remembered it ! What a fool he had been not to have thought of it before ! She had looked up at him in a beseeching kind of way and had said, " Oh, you are English ! I've done such a stupid thing, I've twisted my foot, and I—I'm frightened of these natives—I've got jewellery on—I ought not to have come out here."

" But you're not alone, surely ? " he had said.

" Yes, quite alone. I rode out just as I was. I was warned not to do it, they said I should come to grief—I *have* come to grief. Oh, I'm so awfully frightened, would you mind seeing me safe out of this ? If these men think you know me they'll not dare to molest me. As it is—oh, I'm so frightened."

And then he had escorted her part of the way back, having lifted her on to her steed and issued a sharp order here and there which showed that he was master of the situation. And then he had walked back beside her and had talked to her like a father on the ride home.

" You must never venture anywhere in Egypt without a suitable escort, it isn't safe. And to come out with jewels like those is really extremely hazardous."

" Foolhardy," said the girl, " foolhardy."

And then he had seen a great dust as if someone tearing along towards them, and presently a man on horseback dashed up and flung himself off at the sight of the girl.

"Where have you been? What's happened? Have you had an accident? Have you been out here alone—who is this gentleman?"

"I don't know who he is, I never asked his name," said the girl, turning courteously to L'Estrange. "I—I did a very stupid thing, Otto, a very stupid thing. I just came out here by myself, and I've twisted my foot. They wouldn't understand that I wanted to get back, they meant to rap me on the head, I think. If it hadn't been for this gentleman I don't know what I should have done."

"Why, I should have found you, of course. I heard you had ridden this way. How many times have I told you that you must not do this sort of thing here? It's no use my speaking to you, it's no use my telling you anything."

"Oh, don't be cross, Otto. I've been a fool, but I've got out of it all right, thanks to this gentleman. By the bye, I may as well know your name."

"My name is L'Estrange."

The big man whom the girl had called Otto took off his hat with a flourish.

"We are very much in your debt and thank you extremely," said he. "I will get Madame home with as little delay as possible."

"May I not," L'Estrange had said, "call to inquire for Madame's health?"

"No, thank you a thousand times, we do not

receive," the big man had replied, "we are not here for society."

And looking back from his present standpoint it was incredible to L'Estrange that he had not recognized Lettice. Then he recalled the fact that she had been in pain, that she had worn a shady hat enveloped in a voluminous veil which was neither lace nor gauze; that he had not known her name, certainly not her Christian name; that he had not seen her standing or walking, being in too great pain at the time to do more than hobble, with what help he could give her, to where her steed was standing. At that time L'Estrange was desperately interested in Carmine Adair, and it was not until at least a month later on, when he was thinking of charming little Carmine day and night, the big German, Von Zeidel, had come across his path again. He had recognized him, ah yes, and he remembered how Von Zeidel had taken him on one side on the occasion of their introduction. "You would do me a great favour, Mr. L'Estrange," he had said, "if you will not refer to our former meeting."

"Ah, I was going to ask if Madame had recovered."

"Madame is quite recovered. But, of course, you have grasped the fact that she is not my wife."

"She is English?" L'Estrange had inquired quietly.

"Madame is cosmopolitan, purely so. She is

living practically in seclusion, she receives no visitors, she knows nobody here but me. I don't know that our relations are likely to continue very much longer. I thought it better to put you on your guard."

"Certainly, it is no affair of mine," L'Estrange had answered. "I am glad that I was of use to the lady, that is all."

And, so far as he was concerned, that *was* all, that had been all; and yet, within the last few days it had been apparent to him that Carmine Adair's mother meant to have the Prince Von Zeidel for her son-in-law.

How he had hated the big German! He had never forgotten that there was another woman in the background, a woman of refinement and beauty. Then he had come to see, however unpalatable it might be, that all things had been for the best, that he had been lucky in losing Miss Adair.

And so he had shaken the dust of Egypt off his feet, and had not even kept a look-out to see whether Lady Adair's wishes had come to pass. He had seen Carmine Adair, yes, that very season, but the glamour was all gone, and until he had heard it from Lettice Charteris herself, he had not known any of the details as to the end of her Egyptian visit.

Then his mind went back to Lettice Charteris. She was on the eve of marriage with his greatest

friend, a man younger than herself, a man well born and in every sense a catch in the matrimonial market; and he, L'Estrange, was the only person in all the world, in all Blankhampton, that is to say, who knew the secret of her past. She had been Von Zeidel's mistress!

"By Jove!" his thoughts ran, "what a pluck she has!"

He went back and, as it were, "reconstructed the crime." He pictured the girl's dismay when, after settling herself down with her brother—he imagined Charteris to be her brother—in an out-of-the-way place like Blankhampton, far away from any other place she had known before, she had become aware that somebody had arrived with the incoming regiment with whom she had had touch in the past; somebody who probably would know her the moment he set eyes on her. Of course, she had taken absolutely the wrong course. It was probable that if she had waited to make L'Estrange's acquaintance in the ordinary way and had never mentioned the fact that she knew Cairo, he would never have put two and two together and connected her with the big German Prince who had cut him out with Carmine Adair. And yet he quite understood how she had thought things out and had come to the conclusion that the bold way was the best way. If he had recognized her at once, she would have struck her tent and made no further attempt to make herself a home in



Blankhampton. Well, he blamed himself very much, although he knew he was not actually to blame. But, without doubt, his course was clearly open before him. Open? Why, he had no choice in the matter. If he held his peace now and it ever came out that he had kept such a secret, John Valentine would never be able to forgive him. He knew that under no circumstances would he be able to forgive a man who had so left him in the dark. And yet it was an awful thing to go to a young chap like Valentine and tell him such a story about the woman he was pledged to marry within a few days! Yes, it was an awful thing, and L'Estrange found himself going hot and cold all over at the very thought of it. Yet he hadn't any choice.

He sat there till it was time to dress for mess, and he dressed with a terrible set of questions ringing in his ears, ringing through his brain. How should he begin? How should he account for his not being able to remember what it would seem so incredible to John Valentine that he could have forgotten. It was incredible to himself, although he knew exactly how it had come about. Yet could he make Valentine himself believe it? Would Valentine drop down to it that he had actually at one time had more than an eye to Lettice on his own account. What sort of a fool would he look if John Valentine suddenly taxed him with the fact that he had once been sweet on the girl? Oh, it was an awful position! And

yet he knew that placed as he was it was a matter upon which he had absolutely no choice, upon which he could have no choice.

He was John Valentine's friend, his comrade, and it had suddenly come to his understanding that the girl he was engaged to marry was a girl with a past.

He went down to dinner feeling sick and upset. He knew he'd have to do it, he knew he'd have to do it before he went to bed that night, in fact, that he'd have to do it as soon as he could get half-an-hour's private conversation with John Valentine.

He was rather late, indeed, the Colonel was just going out of the ante-room and into the mess room. He looked round eagerly, but John Valentine was not there. As a matter of fact, John Valentine very seldom was in barracks excepting when he was obliged to be. He was dining with *her*, and L'Estrange's heart gave a sick throb as he realized that he was probably dining with her for the last time.

He was so loth to have his interview with John Valentine that he allowed himself to be beguiled into a game of poker which was played in a brother officer's rooms.

It was past two o'clock before the party broke up. Even then his conscience told him that he could not go to bed until he had seen John Valentine. As he passed his quarters he thumped at

the door, but getting no response he went in and struck a match.

"H'm. Perfectly useless!" For there was John Valentine asleep in his cot looking as happy as a schoolboy.

For a moment L'Estrange stood and looked at him, sick at heart at the prospect of the blow which was about to fall upon him.

"I can't wake the poor devil out of his sleep, when he's dreaming about her most likely."

Once in his own room he sat down for a last pipe, and a last think over the ugly business. Then when the big clock in the church hard by the barracks struck the hour of three, a bright thought came to him. He wouldn't tell Valentine at all. He'd go down to see *her* the first thing in the morning, and he would tell her that he had discovered her. Of course, he guessed she already knew it, but he would tell her in plain, uncompromising language and leave it to her woman's wit to find a way out of the difficulty which would be less humiliating to her, and have just the same effect on John Valentine—that of stopping the marriage. Yes, that would be the best way.

He bothered himself no more, having arrived at this conclusion, but got into bed and slept badly. In the morning, full of his firm resolve, he avoided John Valentine, and as soon as he was dressed, went round to the Colonel's quarters. The Colonel, it must be known, lived in a small

building separate to that for the majority of the officers, and L'Estrange thumped on his door vigorously. Instead of the customary roar from within bidding him enter, the door was opened by the Colonel's servant.

"Can I speak to the Colonel?"

He heard the man stride across the room and then explain something to his master.

"Step in, please, sir," said he.

The door into the bedroom was open, and the Colonel on seeing him said, "Oh, is that you, L'Estrange? Come in. Do you want to see me alone?"

"Not at all, sir. I want to have a couple of hours' leave, that's all. It's on business of the utmost importance, practically life and death."

"Certainly, L'Estrange, certainly. I hope you're not in any trouble of any kind," said the commanding officer kindly.

"Well, not in any personal trouble, sir, but the sooner I can get into the town, the sooner I shall have it off my mind."

"All right. I'm glad it's nothing of a personal nature."

"Thank you, sir," said L'Estrange, and out he went.

## CHAPTER XVII

L'ESTRANGE did not let the grass grow under his feet. He walked straight away from the officers' quarters and out at the main gate. He happened to see a passing cab, into which he got immediately, and drove away down to Little Ogledal. Charles received him with his most beaming smile of welcome and replied in answer to his question that Miss Charteris was just finishing her breakfast.

"She's rather late this morning, sir."

"Well, if Miss Charteris could see me alone," said L'Estrange, "I should be glad."

So he was shown, not into the drawing-room where they had been on the previous afternoon, and where he had mostly seen Lettice, but into her own little sanctum, her own little nest, into which but few people were ever admitted.

She came to him immediately. She was looking lovely, but extremely pale.

"I know why you have come," she said, going straight up to him and not attempting to shake

hands, "I saw my doom in your eyes last night. Have you told him?"

"Not yet," said L'Estrange.

"Not yet!"

She drew a quick breath that was almost a sigh of relief.

"But I'm going to," said he.

"You are?"

"I am—unless you prefer to do it yourself."

"No, I don't intend to tell him," said Lettice.

"If you don't, I shall."

"I can't," said the girl.

"You can't marry him without telling him. Miss Charteris," said L'Estrange, "if you had told him everything you would have put yourself in a very different position."

"Don't you understand?" she said. "*I can't* tell him."

"I think you would find it quite easy. He'll have to know, anyway. Don't you think," he went on, trying to steel himself against the distress in her blue eyes and the pathetic pallor of her charming face, "don't you think it would have been better if you'd told him in the beginning, particularly as I knew?"

"You didn't know. I tried you hard."

"Yes, you would have been much wiser if you had been less bold. It was plucky," he ended, "for I should never have connected you with Cairo if you hadn't yourself given me the clue."

As it is, Valentine has got to know, there are no two ways about it. If you had chosen to keep him in the dark and it had never come out, that would have been your business, and if it had come out, that would still have been your business. But if Valentine finds out that I, his friend, had known all along and never said a word, he would never forgive me."

"What difference does it make to you. I could explain, I could tell you so much."

"Explain it to him now. If he is as much in love as he has all along professed to be he will not mind, he will love you more than ever for having suffered, he will love you more for having told him."

"I don't think so. You advise me to tell him?"

"I do."

"You think he—you—er—Mr. L'Estrange, would it make no difference to you?"

"I don't know. I'm not Valentine, I'm not in the same circumstances. I believe if a man is very much in love, nothing makes any difference but being deceived."

"That depends on the man," said Lettice.

"Yes, that depends on the man, of course."

She turned away from the window. "I can't give him up," she said, the words fairly wrung out of her. "Have you had it in your mind that I'm only marrying him because he's well off and has a position? You're mistaken, Mr. L'Estrange.

I love him. I've tried to tell him, I've thought it over and over, but I couldn't make up my mind to see the light go out of his eyes, to feel that he would coldly turn away from me, that he who had worshipped me so would look upon me as a person—oh, I can't talk about it—you don't understand all that a woman can suffer. I never knew what it was before."

"Then you never cared for that other one?" He jerked his finger over his shoulder, not caring to utter Von Zeidel's name.

"What did I say the first time you came here when we talked about him? Do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember perfectly well, you said he was a brute."

"I did, and I meant it, I'd known it for ever so long—I hated him. I know now that I never loved until I met my fiancé—he is my fiancé," she added, as if in answer to L'Estrange's thoughts. "By the bye," she went on quickly, "what can you tell him about me?"

"I can tell him the truth," said L'Estrange.

"That you once saw me at the pyramids, that I had twisted my foot and that you were kind enough to help me on to my donkey. What more can you tell him?"

"I can tell him," said L'Estrange, "—but there, it's a painful subject. He's got to know, that's all. I'm his friend, his greatest friend, have been for years, I've got to tell him."



"He won't believe you, he won't believe a word, he won't listen."

"He shall listen," said L'Estrange. "What he chooses to do afterwards is his concern, not mine. My duty, Miss Charteris, is plain and clear before me, there are no two ways—there is only one way. Valentine *must* know the truth."

"Well, what can you tell him?"

She was defiant now; she had, as it were, got her back up against the wall. He admired her, he had never admired a woman so much in his life, and yet he was absolutely honest in his mind about her.

"I don't want," said he, "to put it into plain words. You say that Valentine won't believe me. Valentine knows that I'm no mischief maker, Valentine knows that I am no liar. I could tell him what I am sure you would rather he did not know—that you were Von Zeidel's mistress."

"I defy you to prove it."

"My dear lady, it's an easy enough thing to prove."

"You would put yourself," said Lettice, "in a very awkward position. You will have to deal with my brother, I was a ward of Chancery, I can prove my story up to the hilt; I can prove that you were on the most intimate terms with me right up to the time that you found I was going to marry your friend. You didn't actually propose to me, but you did next door to it, and if Mr. Valentine

had not proposed to me you would have done so—don't deny it."

"I neither deny or confirm it. It has nothing to do with the question."

"Hasn't it? You have been on the most intimate terms with me, you have freely visited here and made us your friends. You never hinted that you had a single suspicion of any kind about me until I became betrothed to another man. I gave you every opportunity of remembering about me, and I defy you to bring any proof of anything against me. I refuse to believe that Mr. Valentine will hear a single word that you have to say."

"Then," said L'Estrange, "it's to be war to the knife between us."

"War to the knife," said Lettice.

She was standing facing him, her head well up in air, her eyes flashing, pride and anger plainly expressed in every line of her being.

"Very well," said L'Estrange, "I will tell you what I shall do. I shall go first, now, to Valentine. I shall tell him everything that I know, I shall give him the names of at least a dozen men who knew you intimately under the name of Madame Von Zeidel—that was what you were called in Cairo, not Madame la Princesse, but Madame Von Zeidel. I didn't visit Von Zeidel, so I was not one of those who knew you intimately, but there are those who did, and they are easy enough to find. Supposing that Valentine goes

against the knowledge of years of friendship and refuses to listen, I shall go to the Colonel, and shall lay everything before him. Rest assured, Miss Charteris, Colonel Harcourt will leave no stone unturned to prevent your marriage. Valentine would certainly not be able to remain in the regiment. You don't quite understand what defiance means in this case. I'm sorry, God knows," he said, seeing her shrink back. "I meant, when I went out of this house yesterday afternoon to have told Valentine before I went to bed. He wasn't dining at mess—I suppose you know where he was dining—I hated to be the one to deal the blow, and when I did go to his room I found him asleep. I hadn't the heart to wake him—for that purpose. Then I was thinking about it—I've thought about nothing else since—suddenly I set wide open the windows of the past, and it came to me that there was a way out of it, that I could come and tell you, give you the alternative, tell so that you might break it off yourself without Valentine ever knowing—the truth."

"He won't believe," she said, still proudly holding to her faith in her lover, "he'll not believe a word. He may have to leave the regiment—what is that against his life's happiness?"

"Miss Charteris," said L'Estrange, "believe me, it won't stop with the regiment. The first thing Colonel Harcourt will do will be to go to Matcham."

“To Matcham!”

“Certainly. He will at once acquaint Lord Lucifer with everything that has come to his knowledge. Lady Lucifer has been your social god-mother in Blankhampton, there will be no feeling on her side about not believing. If she had, her husband would not allow her to receive you again. It will be the end of everything so far as Blankhampton is concerned—so far as England is concerned. And do you think it is fair to lay such a burden upon a young fellow like Valentine?”

For a moment she did not speak. Then she turned her head from side to side like an animal trying to escape.

“You hit very hard,” she said, “very, very hard. I suppose it would be bad for him to have a wife—and yet, I would have been such a wife.”

“Tell him everything,” said L’Estrange. “If Valentine himself accepts your explanation it shall go no further than here,” touching his breast.

“Yes, then I’ll tell him,” she cried eagerly.

“But I must have a talk with him also, I must be assured that you tell him everything.”

“You don’t think——?”

“No, Miss Charteris, I don’t think, I don’t trust. You’ve not been quite square with me, you’ve told me things that have led me astray, you’ve not been quite open with me. I must know that you tell Valentine the truth, then if he chooses to say, ‘These things are nothing to me, I’ll take

her in spite of everything,' then I give you my word of honour that no hint or word or sign of your past shall ever pass my lips. Don't answer right away, think it out; I know it will be a crisis in your life, it's worth thinking it over."

He strode to the window and stood looking out, his back half turned towards her. Lettice stood in the middle of the room trying to decide what she should do. Should she risk it, should she tell him everything? Then there came tumbling back to her remembrance a conversation that she had had not long before with John Valentine. It was on no more serious subject than the identity of her dressmaker. "Oh—I didn't know women were like that. I hate lies, I hate mystery," he had said, and then she knew that come what would, she could not, dared not risk the look in John Valentine's honest eyes when he knew that she had deceived him. She looked irresolutely at L'Estrange's tall figure as he stood staring out of the window, she knew nothing of the tumult that was going on in his heart, she knew not that his very soul was sick within him as the soul of a strong brave man would be sick within him if he had to slaughter a helpless child.

"Mr. L'Estrange," she said at last.

He turned quickly.

"I've been thinking."

"Yes," he said eagerly.

"I see what you mean. I can't tell him—he

wouldn't forgive it or forget it. I quite realize your standpoint. I suppose it was too much happiness for a woman like me to hope for. I've always been fated for misery, I thought the wheel had turned at last, and that I was going right into paradise. You are the angel with the flaming sword. The angel is just though terrible, and the sword is pure though it makes one suffer. I—I'll break it off."

"Won't you confide in Valentine?"

"No. I'd rather he thought me fickle than false; I'd rather that he kept the ideal that I know is in his heart. It will comfort me afterwards when I am wretched to feel that even if he's angry he doesn't despise me. Oh, I don't think you understand women, very few men do. It will be best for us to part now. I must ask you to give me a day or two in which to make my plans. I—I will make an excuse to get away to town, I'll send him the news from there. Stay! If I go to town, he'll go with me."

"I can easily get his leave stopped," said L'Estrange.

"Can you? Then that will be best. I'll get packed up now, and when he comes this afternoon I'll tell him I've got to go to town for two or three days. He'll have to go back to barracks to get leave and he won't get it. Then when I get to London I can make definite plans."

"You don't think me an unutterable brute," said L'Estrange.

“No; just a little hard,” she said, looking fixedly at him, “just a little hard. I hope, Mr. L’Estrange, when you come to love yourself, that you will see things with a little less justice and a little more mercy. And yet, according to your point of view, you have acted in the only way that you could.”

## CHAPTER XVIII

I CAN hardly describe the state of mind in which L'Estrange went back to barracks. He knew that he had done the right thing, and yet he had an uncomfortable conviction that if Valentine could have been given his choice, he would have preferred to have remained in ignorance. He was conscious of a regret that she had mistaken her course.

"If only she had never mentioned Cairo," his vexed thoughts ran, "I should never have connected her with Von Zeidel at all. It was plucky, but pluck has been her undoing."

It happened that almost the first person he saw after passing the entrance gates was John Valentine. It was by that time close upon the hour for lunch, and John Valentine was strolling along in the direction of his stables.

"Hullo, Chickweed," he called out, "where have you been gadding off to this morning?"

"I've been into the town on business."

"Business," echoed the younger man. "Ah, it's lucky when people have business that takes them out of this grid. Come round and look at



the little mare I bought the other day for Miss Charteris. She's a clipper, and no mistake; got her cheap, too. Between ourselves, old fellow," he said, thrusting his arm through that of his comrade, "this is no end of a neighbourhood for a bargain in that line, particularly when you've got connections like the Lucifers. Now, I said to Lady Lucifer the last time I saw her, 'Look here, Violet, I want a little mount for her. I want it to be everything that will appeal to a lady, everything that will appeal to a man and everything that will appeal to a horse dealer.' 'And,' said she, 'it isn't much that you're asking.'"

L'Estrange wrenched his arm free. "Old fellow, I can't come now, I've business to attend to, I'll come another time."

He was gone on his way before the last words had left his lips, and John Valentine stood staring after him wide-eyed with astonishment.

"God bless my soul! There's something wrong with L'Estrange. Mind you," he said, gravely addressing himself, "I've seen it coming for some time."

"What the devil are you talking about?" said a voice in the rear.

John Valentine looked round with a good-natured grin.

"Oh, is that you, Barney? I was thinking—at least, I was wondering what the dickens can be the matter with L'Estrange."

"L'Estrange! Oh, he's had the hump for some days."

"Now what can he have got the hump for? He's got plenty of money, he's good-looking, popular—there's not a reason in the world for his getting the hump. I'll tell you what it is," said John Valentine pleasantly, thrusting his arm through that of the newcomer, "when a man gets to L'Estrange's time of life, there's only one course open to him, and that is to marry. If not, he comes to a full stop, and then he begins to deteriorate. That's what's the matter with L'Estrange, he's beginning to deteriorate."

"Perhaps you snapped up the lady."

"Perhaps I did, there's many a true word spoken in jest. Now, look here, old chap, I'm going round to my stables to see a little mare I bought for Miss Charteris yesterday. She is a clipper, and no mistake. You see," he continued volubly, "I wanted to give her an extra wedding present, something that wasn't jewellery, and being in the great horseflesh county, and having connections like the people at Matcham, I thought it was a good opportunity to get what I wanted. And so I said to Lady Lucifer," and then he drew the other one away in the direction of the officers' stables talking hard as they went.

Meantime, L'Estrange had gained the shelter of his own quarters. Once there he shouted for his man, who came running to hear his wishes.

"Samson," he said, "go and get me a double liqueur brandy."

"Right, sir."

It was not often that L'Estrange flew to some form of drink when he was bothered, but that morning he was sick, like a man who has witnessed an execution.

"My God!" he said, as he choked down the potent draught, "I wonder if I shall ever get her eyes out of my memory. I saw a man hanged once—his eyes were awful. I've seen a man broke—yes, broke; it was a gruesome sight. It's their eyes that knock you over. If I hadn't had to look at her I shouldn't have cared, at least, I shouldn't have cared so much. Ugh! Shall I ever get her eyes out of my head!"

He managed to smoke half a pipe before he had to go down to lunch, and then he upheaved himself from his big chair and shook himself together.

"Well, I've got to go through with it, to hear John's rhapsodies about the little mare, and what Lady Lucifer said, and about the bargains in horse-flesh you can get when you're connected with a place like Matcham. Well, it's no use shirking, I've got to go through with it."

He put down his pipe and strode to the door. There he stopped.

"I wish to God," he said, "that my memory had gone on serving me badly till what was done couldn't be undone. I suppose I'm right. Oh,

L'Estrange, old chap, you mustn't be squeamish because a pretty woman's got a pair of telling eyes."

Then he shut the door with a bang and strode away down the corridor. As he crossed the corner of the square towards the mess-room he fell in with two other officers bound the same way as himself, and the three men went into the mess-room together. Fortunately, he found himself quite at the other end of the table to John Valentine. He once or twice caught sight of his happy face and heard his gay laugh ring out. And he was sorry as he had never known what it was to be sorry in his life before.

That afternoon the blow fell, at least, the beginning of the blow fell, for on his way into town he met John Valentine hurrying back to barracks.

"Do you know where the Colonel is?" he asked, pulling up and plunging headlong into the subject.

"I fancy he's gone over to Matcham to dine and sleep."

"Damn!" John Valentine brought his stick down on the edge of the pavement with a sharp crack. "I wanted to see him most particularly. Are you sure he's gone to Matcham?"

"Yes, I saw him start half-an-hour ago."

"What does he want to go to Matcham for? What did Violet want to ask him for? He's not lively anyway. I wanted to see him most particularly, I wanted a few hours' leave. Miss

Charteris is going to town to-morrow, and of course I want to go with her."

"Oh! May you get it! The Colonel's been pretty nasty about leave this morning."

"Nasty or nice, I can't get leave without him, so I may as well turn round and go back with you. But she's going at ten o'clock to-morrow—I wonder if I were to drive over to Matcham—by Jove, that's a good idea, I'll drive over and collar him just before dinner."

"I shouldn't. He'll be sure to resent it if you do, even if it is your cousin's house."

"I must risk that."

"What do you want to go to London for?"

"Because Miss Charteris is going."

"But she's only going to get clothes."

"And so am I. I want most particularly to go."

"Well, I advise you not to follow the Chief out to your cousin's house, he won't like that."

"I can't help that, I shan't keep my lord five minutes, but three days' leave I must have. Hang it all man, a fellow only gets married once—or so."

"There's something in that," said L'Estrange.

So the two parted, and John Valentine strode back to barracks, ordered his dog cart, and was soon trundling merrily along in the direction of Matcham. When he got there he found Colonel Harcourt and all the other guests staying in the house gathered together in the morning room, where they were enjoying a most substantial tea.

"My dear John," said Lady Lucifer, "you are rather late for tea, but the last guns have just come in and the tea is absolutely fresh."

"Thank you, Violet, although I didn't come for tea or anything else."

"Oh, what did you come for?"

"I came to ask the Colonel something."

He sat down, however, by Lady Lucifer and made an excellent meal. Then when he saw Colonel Harcourt for a moment alone he jumped up and promptly, as he put it himself, collared him.

"Oh, excuse me, sir, but can you give me three days' leave?"

"I'm very sorry, I can't," said the Colonel rather shortly.

"O—h! Well, two days?"

"I'm afraid not, Valentine. Good many men away from duty just now, and you're going to have extra leave on account of your wedding, honeymoon and so on. I really must refuse you. Surely," he added, seeing the look of dismay on the boy's face, "you knew that I should be in the office to-morrow morning?"

"I did, sir, but Miss Charteris is going to town at ten o'clock, and I wanted to go by the same train."

"It's out of the question. I'm sorry."

The tone, however, conveyed no sorrow. He passed on, leaving John Valentine looking after him in intense dismay.

“ Well, I’m blowed ! Now, what the deuce has the old chap got in his head now ? Refuse a man leave when he’s going to be married ! Preposterous ! I call it. One might have to see one’s lawyer, or have a hundred and fifty things to see to. By Jove ! I’ve a good mind to send in my papers.”

But he thought better of that long before he got back to Blankhampton barracks. He grumbled a bit to Lady Lucifer, and he grumbled a bit more to himself as he drove along in the fast gathering twilight. Still, he was so happy, and so imperturbably good-humoured that by the time he jumped down at the door of the quarters he was his own genial, smiling self, ready to make the best of what could not be helped. He was not dining at mess that night, in fact he never dined at mess if he could possibly avoid it, and it was with a very rueful face that he announced to Lettice that the Chief had actually refused him a few hours’ leave so that he might go to London with her and her brother.

“ Refused you leave ! ” said Dick, who had just come into the room. “ Why, I never heard of such a thing.”

“ Nor I,” echoed John Valentine. “ Can’t understand what’s come to him. I suppose, the truth is, being a confirmed old bachelor himself, he hates his officers marrying. But if he’s going on like this, and is going to refuse leave every time he’s asked, I shan’t be able to stick it.”

Lettice said nothing; she put out her hand and just touched his.

"Don't worry about it, John," she said.

"Well—I do worry about it. By the bye, you look awfully white and fagged to-night."

"I'm tired. It's—it's a very anxious work, getting married—no, no, I don't mean that, but it's very tiring work. I've written a hundred and thirty-six letters to-day."

"Good heavens! You can't mean it."

"I do, and I'm tired out."

"Well, I shall be thankful when it is all over. That's one of the advantages of getting married quietly. Of course, it doesn't do to be married in a hole and corner kind of way, because it looks as if there's something that's not quite all right. Still, it has its advantages."

"Yes, it has its advantages." Then, as the door opened, "Here is Charles to let us know that dinner is ready. Come, I'm longing for mine."

It crossed John Valentine's mind that he would not let her fag herself out when they were married as she was inclined to do at present.

"Have you ever been ill, Lettice?" he asked.

"Never—oh, I had the measles when I was a child. The Sisters were awfully kind to me, I had tisane and lemonade, and they sat with me all the time and read to me and played games with me. They were awfully kind to me. But I never was ill since."



Her tone was lifeless, and her face was still blanched with the reflection of the terror which had taken possession of her the previous day when she had realized that L'Estrange had suddenly remembered.

"Do you think," said John Valentine to Dick Charteris, when Lettice went away to get something, leaving them alone for a few minutes, "Do you think that she's going to be ill?"

"I don't think so. You don't understand what it is to a young girl to be jacking up her whole life, giving up all her old habits. And Lettice is a very intense girl, she takes things very much to heart."

"You think that's all?"

"I'm certain of it. You wait till next week, old chap, and see if I'm not perfectly right."

"I will. Thank God for it."

And so he cheerfully put his doubts and fears right out of his mind.

But, you see, Dick Charteris was not quite, as he would have put it himself, in the know.

## CHAPTER XIX

THEY adjourned presently to the pleasant drawing-room, and then Dick, without any excuse, betook himself away, leaving them alone together.

"Any more wedding presents to-day?" said John as the door closed.

Lettice looked up. "Oh yes, I think so, a few."

"Anything nice? Are you going to show me?"

"I think," she said, "I'm tired of wedding presents. I'm tired to-night. I haven't opened them."

"Would you like to open them now?"

"No, I shouldn't; I don't want to do anything, only to sit still, just as we are now."

He put his arm round her and drew her close to him. "I ask nothing better for my part," he said. "Why should you be bored with wedding presents and other rubbish of that kind? I say, my darling, be sure you don't overdo it while you are in town. Remember I shall not be there to take care of you."

"Oh yes," said Lettice, "I will remember, I

will take great care of myself when I'm in town, that I promise you."

"After we are married," said John Valentine, "I shall not let you overdo yourself as you are overdone to-night."

"No," said Lettice, "after we are married I will never overdo myself as I have done to-day. I shall not run about London, I shall not go to theatres or do anything of that kind. Promise you will not worry about me."

"If you will promise to take care of yourself."

"Oh yes, I am going to take care of myself from now on. I had to work hard to-day, I had all sorts of things to do that would never enter into a man's calculations. I could never have believed that a girl would be too tired to open her wedding presents, but you see I haven't opened any of these that have come to-day. It only shows how little one knows one's self."

"Are you sure you are not going to be ill?"

"No, I'm not in the least ill, only very, very tired, that is all."

They did not talk very much. She seemed content to sit there resting her head against him, her eyes closed—a tired, drooping figure who, though he did not know it, was counting the minutes that were left to her as a condemned man counts the minutes of a life, the sands of which are fast running out.

"Remember," he said presently, "this is our last parting."

"Yes," she said, "this is our last parting."

"It's no use grumbling at the Chief," he went on. "After all, he is the Chief, and I suppose he has his reasons. I'm so afraid you will tire yourself out."

"I promise I won't."

"Do you know, much as I want to stop, I think I shall go away quite early. If you are going to London by the ten o'clock train you ought to be in bed soon and get a decent night's rest. You're worn out. By the way," he said, a bright thought striking him, "can't you put off your journey till later in the day? Then I could go part of the way with you and dine with you. The mail leaves at midnight."

"No, no," she said, "you can't do that, what's the use of tiring yourself out for nothing, and I can't put off my journey, I've an appointment for two o'clock. I've driven them so; you were in such a hurry, John, you didn't give me enough time to get things ready. You must give way to the poor tradespeople in this instance. I *must* go by the ten o'clock."

"Then," said he, "it's now nearly ten. I think I shall leave you. I hate leaving you, I hate saying good-bye to you even for an hour, but it isn't very long now till we shall be together for always."

"Not very long now," said Lettice, but her meaning was not the same as his.

She made no demonstration at parting, she gave no sign that her heart was breaking beyond conveying the impression that she was really worn out and tired. John Valentine remembered it long afterwards, how he had kissed her, how he had said, "I can't bear you to be tired out like this, and to think that it's all for me. Darling, how I will make up to you for all this later on;" and how she had exclaimed, "Yes, yes, later on."

And then they had parted. She turned back to the fire and John Valentine went out of the house and walked quietly back to barracks all unconscious of the cloud which was hanging over him.

The night passed, the next day slipped by, morning came, and there was no letter from Lettice. Lunch time, dinner time, still no letter. Another night, another dawn, the morning passed, and then the blow fell. Mind you, John Valentine had not made himself miserable over it, and he had had plenty to do, but when he caught sight of the large square envelope addressed in the well-known and beloved handwriting, his heart went out with a throb, the throb that a man has when he receives a letter from the woman he loves. He read it, then he stared at the paper and read it again. What the dickens did it mean? His dazed brain refused to take in the meaning of the words.

"My dear John,—I expect when you have read this letter you will be very angry with me. Well,

be angry, rave at me, hate me, loathe me, you can't loathe me more than I loathe myself. I am not coming back to Blankhampton; there is going to be no wedding. I have made all arrangements for sending back the wedding presents; you will receive all yours to me by the hand of Charles, who has my full instructions for every detail respecting the house and our belongings. Try to forget me, try to forget the girl who came into your life for a little time, and to remember that if you once loved her, she was wholly and entirely unworthy of it. Yours, Lettice."

It happened that Valentine was orderly officer for the day, and therefore was not able to get out of barracks. He was just then free for an hour, and he turned instinctively in the direction of L'Estrange's quarters.

"I say, L'Estrange," he said, bursting into the room and speaking in thick, uncertain voice, "something has happened."

"Hullo, what's up?"

"I don't know. You can read this for yourself. I'm tied by the leg, I can't—I can't even think. What is it? What does it all mean?" he went on, still speaking with the same thick, uncertain accents, "What's the meaning of it all, I say?"

"The lady has changed her mind."

"Changed her mind? Rot. She hadn't changed her mind the last time I saw her. She's been got at."

"Nonsense. She says distinctly, 'I'm not coming back to Blankhampton, there is going to be no wedding.' She's changed her mind. She says you can't hate her more than she hates herself. Old chap, it's a knock-down blow for you, but you have got no choice but to face it like a man."

"But what can it mean—why? Every arrangement was made."

"Had you no inkling of this?"

"No none. The night before she went to London she seemed very queer, very tired, very worn out, as if she wanted to sit still and sleep—to just sit still and do nothing."

"But she spoke?"

"More than once, of our marriage, of the immediate future. My God, she had it in her mind then! She said she was tired of wedding presents, that she had not opened those that had come during the day, that she was tired of them. Does that mean that she was tired of me? My God, no. That woman loved me. There are many loves in a lifetime, but there is never any doubt about the one that comes first of all; one may hesitate about the others, but the one you know perfectly well you are sure of. I was, I am. If I could only get out! But there's not a soul in barracks to take my place. Look here, old chap, go down to the house for me, find out—what there is to find out. Find what instructions Charles has, get Charles to come up and see me, I shall be here

all day. Do this for me, old chap, I'd do as much for you."

"Of course I will, but what will Charles know? You've got your information first hand, he'll know no more, he's only a servant."

"Well, I should like to know, I should, to make sure that they're really not coming back again."

So L'Estrange had no choice but to go down to the town on his pilgrimage to the house in Little Ogledal. For once Charles received him without his usual beaming smile.

"Good morning, Charles," said L'Estrange.

"Good morning, sir."

"I've come from Mr. Valentine. Is it really true that Miss Charteris is not coming back to Blankhampton?"

"Quite true, sir," said Charles. The smile broke out again, and he beamed in his old way as if he were conveying the most delicate good news.

"I was just knocked a little aback this morning. I haven't heard from Miss Charteris at all, sir; I just had a letter from the master giving me instructions to take the silver to the bank, and to see the wedding presents returned, each with a printed note which would be here to-morrow. I am to see the furniture packed up and taken away for storage, and to put the house in the hands of several agents."

"For sale?"

"Yes, sir, for sale. They are never coming



back to Blankhampton. I've got a proof of the note that's to be sent out with the wedding presents."

L'Estrange took it and read, "The marriage between Mr. John Valentine, the Scarlet Lancers, and Miss Lettice Charteris, arranged for October 15th, will not take place. Miss Charteris returns the present you were so kind as to send with sincere thanks and much regret."

"Miss Charteris' maid is coming down to-night to pack her things; I daresay we shall hear more then."

"And you, Charles?" said L'Estrange.

"Well, sir, I've got orders and authority to see the house cleared and to pay all the servants off with a quarter's wages and to give them excellent references as from Miss Charteris. Myself, I can either take a quarter's wages or hold myself in readiness to go to Mr. and Miss Charteris when sent for."

"And you'll go?"

"Yes, sir, I shall go; I'm very much attached to Mr. and Miss Charteris. It's very dreadful, something terrible has happened."

"Yes, it's very terrible, and Mr. Valentine is as much in the dark as you and I are. I daresay he'll come down and see you to-morrow."

As the man had evidently no more information to give him it was useless for L'Estrange to remain any longer interrogating him. He slipped a hand-

some tip into his hand, and bade him "Good-day."

"My dear boy," he said, when he found himself once more in Valentine's presence, "it's no use your wondering and cogitating. You've got to give her up, she's gone out of your life just as she was coming into it. There must be a reason for it, no lady would act like this unless there were. Take my advice, put a stop on the whole concern. You'll be happier when once the wrench is over. The girl has gone, the brother has gone, they've taken up their tent, pole and all, and they don't mean to come back again. Lettice Charteris has pulled down the blind from her side, there's nothing else for you to do but to accept her decision."

"I won't. I shall never give her up, I shall never put a stop on it. I shall follow her to the end of the earth. I shall find her, mark my words."

"I don't think so. Charles has no more information than you."

"I'll go down and see the maid to-morrow, she will know where they are going."

For a few seconds L'Estrange sat on in silence. At last he looked up.

"Valentine, old chap," he said, "there's something else that you will have to do, that under circumstances you must do. You must in some way announce it to the regiment. You've an-

nounced your marriage. Your wedding present is down there, all the fellows have been invited to the wedding. To-morrow the big rose bowl that they've given you will come back with that wretched little printed note. You can't let that burst like a thunderclap in the mess-room."

"No, no, of course not. I—I can't announce it. L'Estrange, you've stood my friend all along."

"In every way that I could," replied L'Estrange steadily, but his heart sank within him.

"Well, old fellow, tell them for me. Ask them not to talk to me about it."

"They won't."

"Well, just make sure. To-morrow I will go down and see Lettice's maid."

## CHAPTER XX

JOHN VALENTINE, however, got no sort of satisfaction out of his interview with Lettice's own maid. That discreet young person told him that she had come to Blankhampton for an unfixed time with orders to remain until Charles had carried out all his master's instructions. She had brought with her a list of things that were to be packed and stored away, and another list of things that were to be packed ready for export. Miss Charteris' ordinary clothing she would take away with her."

"And her trousseau?" John Valentine rapped out.

"Her trousseau? Sir, Miss Charteris isn't going to wear it. All that has been packed up and stored in London."

Then his reserve broke down. "Pinkey," he said, "can you tell me anything about it?"

"No, sir, nothing."

"You don't know what has happened?"

"No, sir, I haven't any idea, but whatever happened, happened in this house, not in London."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, sir; Miss Charteris was broken-hearted when she went out of this house. Charles looked at me and I looked at him—we talked it over when I arrived. She looks dreadfully ill—she's quite collected and sweet and polite, just like herself. She isn't one to pull a long face and cry a lot. Miss Charteris never has been an uncontrolled kind of lady, but she's got a face like a mask, in fact, to tell you the truth, sir, I was glad to get away down here out of sight of her eyes."

"But you're going back?"

"Oh yes, sir, Miss Charteris couldn't get on without me."

"No, I'm sure she couldn't. And where is she going?"

"That's more than I can tell you, sir. They left London——"

"What—they've gone?"

"Yes, sir, they went this morning at ten o'clock. They've gone to Paris, and when I leave Blankhampton I shall go to Paris too."

"And you will meet them there?"

"No, but I shall get my instructions where to join them, and I have promised faithful not to let a living soul, excepting Charles, who goes with me, know the day I go."

"Pinkey," said Valentine miserably, "it's no good pretending to you, who knows just how things were, that I'm not completely broke up by all this. There wasn't a hint, there wasn't a sign. The

night before she went away I only thought she was tired, physically tired. I never saw what was coming."

"If you had it would have made no difference."

"How do you know?"

"Well, sir, I don't know," said Pinkey, "but Miss Charteris is that kind of young lady, if she made up her mind that she had to follow a certain course, she would follow it. She isn't one to be easily over-persuaded or daunted."

"I know—I know. And you'll tell her, Pinkey, that I came and what I said?"

"There's nothing to prevent me taking a letter to her if you like to write one, sir."

"Pinkey, you're a jewel, a treasure! I'm glad you're not going to leave Miss Charteris. I will write to her; I won't attempt to trace her or anything of that kind, I wouldn't do anything to annoy her for all the world."

"I shall be here for a week or two, sir, I've got a great deal to do. I've got to pay up all Miss Charteris' bills—it may be a month before I get away. You know, sir, that Charles is going with me?"

"Yes, yes, I heard so."

He turned abruptly and walked round the room looking at all the treasures at which he had so often looked in company with Lettice.

"I'll go now, Pinkey," he said. "I'll write and I'll come in a day or two bringing you the

letter. I don't know that I shall not get away if I can get leave—oh, not to Paris, I wasn't thinking of that. I shall see her again, I shall get to the bottom of this mystery, but not at this moment. I think I shall go down to my own place, just to get out of the road of what people look."

Pinkey stood and watched him as he strode away up Little Ogledal, then, turning to go into the house, she found that Charles was just behind her.

"It's queer, Charles," said she.

"Queer isn't exactly the word," said Charles. "For my part I thought there'd been a quarrel between them, but it doesn't seem so."

"Quarrel!" said Pinkey, "not a bit of it. There never was that. I was there when he said 'Good-night' to her. If you remember you were out and I happened to be coming along the gallery when Mr. Valentine came out of the drawing-room. I heard him say, 'No, no, don't come to the door, my darling, I don't want you to catch cold.' Oh, there hadn't been a quarrel, that's certain sure."

"I wonder," said Charles, looking reflectively up the quiet street, "I wonder what it was? Why it was? One thing's certain, 'tain't Mr. Valentine himself. Of all the gentlemen that have come here," said Charles in a judicial tone, "Mr. Valentine is the out and out toppest. Our miss was in love with him, he was in love with our

miss, plenty of money on both sides, master willing, not to say overjoyed, everything ready for the wedding—now, whose fault was it?”

“Well,” said Pinkey rather uppishly, “it isn’t exactly any business of ours.”

“No,” said Charles, “and yet it wouldn’t be human if you and me didn’t take more than an ordinary interest in something out of the common that has taken place under our very noses. I don’t mind confessing that I would like to know.”

“And so would he, poor fellow,” said Pinkey, turning her eyes in the direction of the corner round which John Valentine had just disappeared, “and so would he, poor fellow.”

“Ah, there I believe you, so he would. Now, one might have thought,” he went on reflectively, “that Mr. L’Estrange had had a hand in it, only he came down here most upset the other day.”

“Oh, did he?”

“Oh, most upset.”

“I don’t like Mr. L’Estrange,” said Pinkey, “but then, I always thought he had an eye to our miss himself.”

“I daresay he had, it’s more than likely. But he was pretty well taken aback when he come down here—and that was for his pal, don’t you forget that.”

“I wouldn’t like to say it to everybody,” said Pinkey, “but Mr. L’Estrange came down here the afternoon before our miss changed so much, the



very afternoon before. Mr. Valentine dined here that night—someone else was dining here too, I forget who, I didn't take particular notice—and in the morning Mr. L'Estrange came again and Miss Charteris saw him in her own room. Why did he come in the morning? It's my opinion, Charles, that Mr. L'Estrange is at the bottom of everything."

Charles drew a long breath. "Pinkey," he said, "if I were you I'd not let that pass my lips. If it's true that Mr. L'Estrange has had a hand in this business, it won't do you and me any good to have known anything about it. Mark my words, Pinkey, 'the least said the soonest mended.' It's an old proverb and a homely one, but as my old mother used to say, a truer one never was put together. It goes arm in arm with 'Mind your own business' and 'Let that fly stick by the wall.'"

"One can have one's thoughts, Charles," said Pinkey with great disgust.

"Yes, Pinkey, you can have your thoughts and so can I, but it's best to keep 'em thoughts. And God knows," said Charles, speaking very gravely, that never were two people more sorry for two other people than you and me, and however much we may like each other—and however much we may disagree," as Pinkey tossed her head, "it'll always be a bond of union between you and me."

"Oh well, as to that, Charles," said Pinkey,

"I'm very glad you've decided to go abroad with Mr. and Miss Charteris, and there's the tea bell, so let's go down or the others 'll think we're flirting."

"Let 'em think," said Charles, "and as to that, I don't know that they'd be very wide of the mark."

"If you think I'm a flirt, Charles——" began Pinkey.

"Well," said Charles, "there's a great difference between being a flirt and doing a little flirting. I've never regarded you as a flirt, Pinkey, although you've flirted with me and I've flirted with you, and if we're going to cast in our lot with the master and mistress, and are going to travel about, the Lord knows where, I don't know that it wouldn't be better if you and me were to make it a double as well as a permanent situation."

"Why, Charles," said Pinkey, with a suspicious dewiness about her eyes, "you've always said, and you've said it over and over again in my hearing, that Lavinia is the finest woman in Blankhampton."

"Which," said Charles, "in a sense she is, but I've never told you or Lavinia herself, that I ever intended to invite her to be Mrs. Charles Tulkingham."

"Yes," said Pinkey, "but the fact that you don't feel inclined to invite Lavinia to fill that important position doesn't imply exactly that you do intend

to invite anybody else, and of course, him that admires Lavinia mightn't admire me."

"A fine grown young woman," said Charles, "but a little overpowering. Lor', Pinkey, when I think of Lavinia's thick waist and her flat figure and her great round cheeks and her little eyes, and her stack of hair fluffed up anyhow, and I think of you, with your little round waist, and your smooth skin and your great eyes, and your long eyelashes, and your look as if you'd been turned out of a bandbox—what d'you take me for?"

"I can't take you for anything till you've asked me," said Pinkey coquettishly.

"My dear," said Charles, "if that's all you're waiting for, I'll put it into plain English. Sophie Pinkey, will you have me?"

"Yes, Charles," said she, "I will."

And so there bloomed roses in the desert.

## CHAPTER XXI

THE loves of Charles and Sophie Pinkey do not affect the main lines of this story. The days dragged by for John Valentine; they dragged on to a slow and seemingly interminable length. He spent some days, or, I should say, spent the leisured part of some days, in writing a letter to Lettice. It was a pitiful appeal. He entreated her at least to confide in him. "I am absolutely convinced," he wound up, "that in some way you've been got at. You love me, you never gave me up of your own free will—why should you? We have never had the semblance even of a disagreement, we have never agreed even to differ for we never had anything to differ about. I see now that you had this in your mind when I left you the last time, but that you loved me then as much or more than you had ever done is equally apparent to me. I entreat you therefore to explain. If there is a really good reason I will accept it, and I will never trouble you again. But I think, under the circumstances that I ought to be the judge.

What does your own sense of honesty towards me tell you? That you have changed towards me I absolutely refuse to believe unless I have positive and definite proof direct from yourself. The fact that you have given me up is nothing; every line of your letter betrays a broken heart. You were to have been my wife by this time, it is due to me that I should know what it is that has come between us. Besides this, dearest, it is terrible fighting an unknown enemy in the inky darkness. I feel certain that you have acted as you have done in order to deliberately make me angry with you so that I might get over losing you. Why should I have to lose you? Indeed, it is due to me not to leave me in the dark any longer. Is it possible that you have been mixed up with another man and that he is blackmailing you or something dreadful of that kind. I never put any questions of this sort to you, I never asked you whether you had loved before. I took you as I found you, God gave you to me and I was happy. The fellows here have been very good to me, your name has never been spoken, I see them even trying to control their looks, but the strain upon me is horrible. I don't care what people think, I never did care for outside opinion, but wherever I go I always feel myself pointed at as the man whose sweetheart ran away from him. As soon as I have finished this letter I shall put in for leave and I shall go to my own place for a little while. There

they don't know any details, only that my engagement didn't come off. I daresay I shall get quite a good time—I wonder! ”

At last the letter was finished, and John Valentine went and once more interviewed Pinkey. He found the house dismantled, and learned from her that she and Charles were staying at the Station Hotel and that the sale of the house was to take place the following day; that the less valuable portion of the furniture had been sold the day previously, and that all sorts and conditions of people had applied for permission to view the house until it had been like a raree show.

“I've been asked questions, sir,” said Pinkey indignantly, “that positively made my blood boil to listen to.”

“It isn't worth letting your blood boil, Pinkey,” said John Valentine, “but I know what you mean. Then you'll give that letter to Miss Charteris when you see her, and if she wants to answer it, the regiment will always find me.”

“I will, Mr. Valentine.”

“Thank you very much, Pinkey. I thought things would be different to this, but I have to thank you very much for your sympathy and your kindness, and I hope you'll accept this little present from me. I hope, Pinkey, that your happiness will come to you more easily than mine has done.”

"Oh, sir, you're very kind, and Charles and me——"

"What! Are you and Charles going to make a match of it, are you really? Well, I wish you both the best of luck. Perhaps my wishes won't do you much good. They say in gambling circles that it's lucky to take the seat of a man who has just lost everything, so perhaps my good wishes *will* bring you luck. Good-bye, Pinkey, good-bye."

"Which," said Pinkey five minutes later when Charles came and found her staring out through the undraped window into the desolate garden, "I feel as if my heart was broken. He gave me this," she went on, holding out the envelope on her hand, "I couldn't tell you the words he said, because I've got to go through the streets to the hotel, and I don't want to look as if I had a huge blister all over my face—it's a present—oh, Charles, Charles, Charles, I shall never get over this."

"Well, if it's a present, I should open it. I'm sure Mr. Valentine didn't give you a present to keep in an envelope," said Charles sensibly. "And after all, it isn't our fault that he and our miss didn't pull it off."

"No, Charles, neither is it; but I feel, Charles, as if my heart was broken."

Curiosity, however, eventually got the better of Pinkey's broken heart, and with Charles's help

she broke open the envelope. The contents proved to be two five-pound notes, which fluttered pleasantly in the autumn draughts.

"It's handsome pay for posting a single letter," said Charles in a tone of much satisfaction.

"Yes, it is," said Pinkey, "but I shouldn't have put such a price upon that particular service. I think that Mr. Valentine gave it to me for a very different reason, and I'll deliver it," she said in a quavering voice, "as if it were to the King himself."

Meantime, John Valentine was going on his way with a curious sort of feeling that he had laid the train which would give him the one chance of getting through the outer gate into Paradise. He went straight back to barracks and over to the quarters occupied by the Colonel. On the doorstep he met the Colonel's servant.

"Oh, is the Colonel in, Jenkins?"

"Yessir."

"Ask him if he'll see me for a minute."

"Very well, sir," was the man's reply.

He went back into the first door and John Valentine waited in the entrance. Then Jenkins came back.

"Will you step in, sir."

The Colonel was seated at a table in the middle of the room which was covered with papers and correspondence.



"Oh, it's you, Valentine," he said, "is it? Well, what can I do for you?"

"I want—I want leave," said Valentine. "I know it isn't quite my turn to get winter leave, but I was to have had it, and—er—to put it frankly, Colonel, I want to get away for a bit."

"Yes, I'm sure you do."

"I thought," Valentine went on, "that I might have got over it without. I don't like to show the white feather, and though it was a knock-down blow, I meant to take it standing. They have been very good, all of them, they've never breathed a word, never given a hint; they've set themselves not to look as if anything out of the ordinary had happened. But you know, sir, you can't stop thoughts. We can control everything else, looks, voice, speech, manner, but thoughts get the better of us, and every time I go into the ante-room, I know exactly what each of them is thinking, 'Here's that poor devil Valentine who was going to be married, and she chucked him up for another Johnny.'"

"And did she?" said the Colonel.

"I don't know, sir. I believe not. Miss Charteris didn't give me any reason."

"Didn't give you any reason, Valentine?"

"No, sir. Look here, sir, I've never shown her letter to anyone except L'Estrange. He knew her before, she was an old friend of his, and I—I wish

you would look at it, sir, and tell me what you think."

"I will, of course I will."

Valentine took the letter from his breast pocket; it was getting very worn and shabby looking. The Colonel opened it, smoothed it out and read it, once, twice, three times.

"What do you make of it, sir?"

"I really don't know," said the Colonel. "It's very mysterious."

"You wouldn't say there was a hint of another Johnny, would you?"

"Not at all, not at all. You say L'Estrange knew her, was an old friend of hers."

"Yes, sir, he was."

"You think he was in her confidence?"

"I think not, no sir, I think not. I've just come from the house now."

"What! She's in Blankhampton?"

"No, sir, she's not in Blankhampton, I don't know where she is, but her maid and the butler have been carrying out instructions for giving up the house. It's to be sold to-morrow. The best part of the furniture has been taken away and stored, the rest was sold yesterday. Then those two, the man and the maid, are going to join them, where they don't know."

The Colonel sat back in his chair and surveyed John Valentine with keen, critical eye.

"Valentine," he said, "I didn't know Mr. and

Miss Charteris very well, I dined there once, and I went to tea once or twice when she had a party, but I wasn't in any way intimate with them, so you must take what I say as a mere expression of opinion, which, in telling me all this, you have practically asked for. And you must believe that I have no personal bias, excepting towards yourself. Did it ever occur to you that there is always something unsavoury in a mystery? "

" Unsavoury ! "

" Well, it's a strong word to use, and yet I don't know what other would explain my meaning better. You have a charming girl, a pleasant manly brother; they're good-looking, attractive, well blessed with this world's goods, and altogether are in a most enviable position. But there's a mystery. Did it ever occur to you to link L'Estrange with it in any way? "

" Oh no, sir. He had met her in Egypt, he had known her there, but I gathered that he had not known them very well—he had met them. When he came to Blankhampton they hadn't been here very long, and the acquaintance was renewed, that is all."

" Ah! I see. But Valentine, there's a mystery, and to English people, when there's a mystery about people who have lived a good deal abroad, it generally means something fishy. I know that you are very much in love with this very charming girl, everybody can see it, we all know it and we're

all sorry for you, but in the days to come you may feel that Providence, or Fate, shapes things out to the best end. You've got to get through the next few months, but you'll only live one day at a time, and you'll have to comfort yourself with the fact that other men have gone through the same kind of trouble before."

"That doesn't help me, sir."

"Doesn't it? It ought to. Most men have an affair of the heart that doesn't end in marriage. Sometimes the scar that is left never heals, and they go on fighting their battle day after day until the world sees in them nothing but selfish, cut-and-dried old bachelors. That's when the wound never quite goes away. But there's another kind of wound, Valentine, it leaves nothing but a scar behind it, and scars don't always prick when the weather is going to be rainy. In that case the heart suffers hideously for a time, but mercifully gets over it. Now you can't tell yet which of these yours is going to be. Still, my dear fellow, be the end what it will, let the future bring what it must, there's no getting over the fact that you've got to fight it out, one day at a time."

## CHAPTER XXII

BETWEEN them the Colonel and the General in command of the district stretched a point in the matter of John Valentine's leave, and a few days later he went away from Blankhampton for ever. Mind you, he did not know that he was going away for ever. He went to London and passed a few days in the ordinary manner of a young man fresh from country quarters who comes up to the great world as a fish comes up to the surface of the water—saw his tailor, paid a visit to his shirt maker, looked in at a few theatres, mixed with the men at his club, and did the round of the music-halls. Of private visits he made none, for just then Society and John Valentine were very much out at elbows with each other. But he took no zest in fashion, there was no savour in theatres, and the music-halls bored him; and at last, after a fortnight of this, John Valentine lost patience with the world and went down to the beautiful old home in the far West country which was known as Valentine's Hope.

It was a sad home-coming. He had confidently looked forward to a long sojourn at Valentine's

Hope with *her*; he had many a time dreamed of the day when they would grow tired of soldiering, or when he should have got through his command—that goal towards which all young soldiers press—and should settle down under their own vine and fig tree.

But his home-coming was alone, *she* was right out of the picture.

I must confess that he was happier at Valentine's Hope than he had been at any time since he had parted from Lettice. After all, he was among his own, and somehow or other, the sympathy which he read in every eye which met his was a different kind of sympathy and hurt less than the feeling which he had recognized heretofore. He was among his own. The old woman who had nursed him as a baby welcomed him at the door, wearing the black satin gown and other insignia of the stately family housekeeper. And she came according to her custom when her adored nursling was at home on leave and had no visitors with him, and ministered to him as he took his meals. She was a woman of comparatively few words and yet she had the knack of encouraging others to unburden themselves to her. Before Valentine had been twelve hours in the house, he had told "old Nursie," as he still called her, the whole story of his broken engagement.

"I don't know what's happened, Nursie," he said at last, "I don't pretend to be able to make

it out, and perhaps I never shall. There's been mischief at work, that's certain."

"Eh, Master Johnny," said the old woman, "I wouldn't fret myself, I would just hold tight on to the idea that it's just a temporary something that has come between you."

"You think so, Nursie?"

"I do."

John Valentine drew a long breath of relief. "You know, Nursie, I've got the most tremendous faith in your judgment, always have had, you're the wisest old woman I ever knew. And you really think that it will come right yet?"

"Well, Master Johnny," said she, slipping back into the old familiar way of speaking, "you tell me you're as certain as you are that you're alive that there's nobody else."

"Certain."

"And that she really loves you with all her heart?"

"Certain, Nursie. Look here, I'll show you her portrait, that ought to convince you if nothing else will."

He drew from his pocket, that inner one next to his heart, a flat leather letter case in which he carried two beautiful photographs of Lettice.

"There," he said, "look at that, and look at it closely. Wouldn't you be in love with her if you were me, Nursie? Now, wouldn't you?"

"I daresay I should," said the old woman,

"if so be, Master Johnny, I was a fine young gentleman like you. Yes, she looks straight and good and true. It's a sad face, a very sad face."

"Sad!" echoed John Valentine. "No, Nurse dear, Miss Charteris hasn't a sad face, not at all. She's always bright and gay and full of fun, always a smile—and it's a charming smile. I've never seen her sad—at least, only once."

"And that?" Mrs. Druce inquired.

"That? Yes—she was very tired that night, she didn't strike me as sad, only tired. I suppose she *was* sad, only she didn't seem so, only tired, very tired."

"Well," said Mrs. Druce, "to me it's a sad face, Master Johnny. I read once in a book that all faces tell a story, one that's past or one that's to come. It wasn't put that way, it was put in proper language, but I can't remember that. To me that face tells a very sad story, and it'll be for you, Master Johnny, to take care that it's a story gone by, not one that's got to happen."

The conversation comforted John Valentine not a little, and he set himself with what patience he could, to get through the time until there was a possibility of hearing from Lettice.

There was plenty to do. He looked over the estate, did a little shooting, hunted a good bit, and got through the days somehow. But there was no reply from Lettice, not a word. Christmas came and went, New Year passed by, and as his



horrible feeling of loneliness increased there also came upon him a feeling that come what might he could not go back to Blankhampton and face the life which hitherto he had thoroughly enjoyed; the inane jokes, the noise, the want of privacy, the consciousness that every man knew the ins and outs of his story—at least, as much of it as he knew himself. All these things combined to make John Valentine feel that whatever he had to bear in the time to come, he could not and would not endure life in the regiment again.

With him to think was to act, and long before his leave was up he had sent in his papers. Then L'Estrange came to stay with him, not for long, just a few days, and the very sight of him confirmed him in his belief that come what might, he would at least live out his trouble by himself. For L'Estrange, with a view to brightening his life and giving him something to think of, regaled him with much regimental gossip and talked of "the fellows" until the very soul of John Valentine was sick within him.

He broke the news of his determination to L'Estrange as they sat together at breakfast on the morning of the last day of his stay.

"I say, old chap," he said, "I'm—I'm not coming back."

"Not coming back! You're not going to chuck the Service?"

"I am. I'm awfully tired of it."

“ Don’t you think it’s rather a pity ? ”

“ No, I don’t. I shouldn’t have stayed beyond my command under any circumstances. I’ve had the best time in the Service I’m ever likely to have. I don’t think I should have stayed long if things had gone differently with me. As it is, I simply couldn’t stand the mere cut-and-dried routine.”

“ You’re going to travel ? ”

“ Yes, a bit, perhaps—oh, I’m not going after big game, if that’s what you mean ; I’m not so keen on killing things as some fellows are.”

“ What are you going to do with yourself ? ”

“ Well, I’m going to live among my own people, there’s a lot to do on a big estate like this, that is, if you do your duty. I’ve left things pretty well to take care of themselves, and I’ve come to see that I wasn’t altogether right in that. Anyway, I’d rather not go back to Blankhampton, to say nothing of taking up the life among the fellows again. They’re all very well, they mean well, they’re good chaps and all that, but they’d always be thinking—and I should always be thinking—and—it wouldn’t work, old chap.”

“ You mean on account of——”

“ Yes, exactly, on account of what I’ve been through.”

“ Valentine,” said L’Estrange, half hesitatingly, “ aren’t you getting over it a little ? ”

“ Not a bit,” said John Valentine, “ not a bit. Every day when I get up I think, ‘ How am I

going to get through this day without her? What am I going to do to kill time, to keep myself from thinking?' Nothing kills time, nothing keeps me from thinking. Every night when I go to bed, I go through a regular performance, all the time-honoured ways for getting to sleep. I mostly see the dawn break and then I drop off into an uneasy kind of doze, and that's about all the sleep I get."

"You've never heard from her?"

"Not a word. Old chap, it's the awful dead blank mystery of it that's so hard to bear. If there had been anybody else it would have been easy enough. I'm not the sort of chap that hankers after a woman who likes another Johnny better. But there's nobody else."

"Has there never been anybody else?" asked L'Estrange.

"Possibly. If there has been he was nothing in comparison to me. I was the man of her heart, the man of her choice. There—it isn't any good talking about it, but I can't go back to the old life. There are some things that happen to us, you know, L'Estrange, that make no mark, no impression upon us at all; and there are other things that change all our lives. Well, all my life has been changed, but I wouldn't go back," he went on, staring reflectively into the fire, "I wouldn't go back for everything I possess."

"How go back?"

"I mean I wouldn't undo it. I've loved and

been loved again—it won't bear talking about. My engagement was one of those milestones that mark one's life, the breaking of it was one of those wounds that serve to make a man old. When I went to Blankhampton I was a light-hearted boy, I hadn't a care in the world, I didn't understand the meaning of the word trouble—I'd never had any. My father and mother died when I was young, I had a decent guardian and the best old nurse in the world. I never knew what it was to want what I couldn't have. But I've found out since, I've made up for it, I am making up for it with every breath I draw. I suppose it's by way of compensation, I had too many of the good things of this world, I didn't half value them. Some fellows lose their money, I haven't lost mine, but all my life has been turned to ashes in my mouth. It's the old story of the Dead Sea fruit, fair and lovely without, full of ashes and bitterness within—it mayn't be the right quotation, but it's something of that kind. By Jove, I've come to know it!"

"I think you're making a mistake in giving up your profession, all the same."

"Perhaps, but I'm going to do it."

"My dear Valentine," said L'Estrange, "there are other women in the world."

"Yes, but not like that woman, there is no other like that woman, she is unique."

"Every man thinks that, Valentine."

"Yes, but some go on thinking it. I'm one of them."

For a moment L'Estrange did not speak. Then he looked up at his friend.

"Valentine," he said, "I shouldn't have touched on this if you hadn't broached the subject to me, but has it ever occurred to you that Miss Charteris must have had a very strong incentive to treat you as she did."

"Certainly."

"There is no doubt that she was fond of you."

"No doubt."

"And you of her."

"Equally without doubt."

"She went away without giving you the smallest chance or choice in the matter, she simply cut it all off at the last minute in spite of all she was leaving you to face. She took her home up by the roots, she simply put herself right out of your life."

"Well?"

"Do you think she did that for nothing, for a mere caprice?"

"Certainly not."

"Then has it ever occurred to you to try to find out the cause?"

"Occurred to me? My God! How can I find out, I can't find *her*, I don't know where she is, I've never had a word from her since that last miserable little letter that she wrote me from London. Have I thought! L'Estrange, I've thought

and thought and thought until my brain was like to burst. I get through the days fairly well, give myself heaps to do, miss no chance of keeping myself occupied, but I can't do that at night. At night I lie awake and think and think and think, until I believe the end of it will be that I shall go out of my mind. What it could have been, why she should have done it, is beyond me."

"It must have been a very strong inducement, it must have been something very serious to make her break off her engagement, to make them break up their home and to send them out into the world travelling again—at least, one presumes so, when they both took such joy in that beautiful old house in Blankhampton. It couldn't have been a small thing, Valentine, to make a woman act like that."

"No."

"You say she didn't confide in you in any way?"

"No, not in any way—Oh, I know what you are going to say, you needn't say it. I suppose it was too good a chance for me, I hadn't worked for it, I hadn't deserved it, no man deserves all the luck, at least, it's very seldom that he gets it. At all events," he wound up, "if ever I have the chance——" Then a new idea came to him. "I was going to say something injudicious, old chap, I won't say it, it would be tempting Providence."

And then he shut his mouth like a steel trap, and not another word could L'Estrange get out of him.

## CHAPTER XXIII

So L'Estrange went back to the regiment and John Valentine's career in the Army came to an end. He sent his agent down to Blankhampton to collect his belongings and to pay up his few debts, and he presented a handsome piece of plate to the mess to which he would never belong any more. And so his military career came to an end.

He felt better when he had severed himself from all associations which would remind him of Lettice. He flung himself heart and soul into the work of the estate, but in spite of what he had said to L'Estrange about his duty as a great landlord, he did not find forgetfulness or any particular scope for his powers. His agent, who had had charge of the estate for years was a man who had every detail of it at his fingers' ends, and as every cottage was up-to-date and in perfect order, and the newest agricultural implements were to be found on every holding, John Valentine very soon realized that his position was and must remain more of an ornamental than a useful one. So he found himself obliged to fill up his time as best he could with much hunting and shooting, and by the end of February he was in the hands of the doctor.

Now John Valentine had never in all his life

before known what it was to be ill. Mrs. Druce warned him at first that he could not, any more than any other man, afford to take one heavy cold on the top of another, and to run risks from damp and chill as if he were a mere lump of stone or a block of wood.

"Master Johnny," she said to him one evening when he had come in soaked to the skin and chilled to the bone, "you're doing your best to catch your death. I knew a man once," she went on wisely, "who used to say that a person who let himself get cold was an idiot and deserved all he got. His greatest pleasure was in shooting wild duck, and for this he would stand up to his neck in water for hours and hours together. He was a strong man and nothing seemed to hurt him, but one day he came home chilled and shuddering, and for ten years before he died he was stricken stiff. He used to go about in a sort of glass case on a carriage, something like the Irish car that Mrs. Fitzmaurice had—you remember Mrs. Fitzmaurice down to Ravenscroft?"

"Yes," said John Valentine.

"Well, this man was stricken stiff that night of the chill he got shooting wild duck. He thought a man was a fool who coddled a cold, and he had ten years of spare time to think over the consequences of his own folly."

"Oh, don't scold, Nursie," said John.

"No, Master Johnny, I'm not scolding exactly,



said Mrs. Druce, "but I'm warning you, and I shouldn't be doing my duty, Master Johnny, if, knowing everything, I let you go on and kill yourself."

"Well, that would be no great loss."

"Oh, shame, Master Johnny, shame! I never heard you say a really wicked thing before in all my life. Why, if the mistress that is to be knew of the risks you were deliberately running she'd just be fit to break her heart."

"You think she would?"

"Of course I think she would. Now, you'll please get those wet things off and have a hot bath, a very hot bath, and I'll bring you something hot to take as soon as you're comfortably tucked up in bed—and as for that, I'll have a warming pan put in your bed while you're in your bath."

"I wouldn't bother," said John Valentine, "there's nothing the matter with me, I've got a bit of a chill, that's all."

But there was something the matter, and early the next morning Mrs. Druce, without further ado, sent off a messenger in hot haste for the family doctor. The doctor was very peremptory in his directions and instructions, and for a whole fortnight John Valentine never moved out of his bed. At the end of that time it was a gaunt and weakly spectre who tottered into the adjoining room, and when yet another week had gone by and he was beginning to pick up a little, the old doctor had a very serious talk with him.

"Now, you'll just listen to me, John," said he, for he had never addressed him otherwise in his life, "no more hunting this season, no more shooting, and the sooner you get out of this part of the world, the better, that's if you want to keep clear of pneumonia in the future."

"Can't think how I came to get it," said John Valentine.

"Well, you came to get it quite easily. You were very much run down, you've altered all your mode of life lately, and you've been running all sorts of risks that nobody but a fool, a fool, mark my words, would ever dream of running. Now, I'm going to be no party to moral suicide. Valentine's Hope is a very charming place under some circumstances, but it's not the place for you at this time of the year."

"I was born here," said John obstinately.

"I don't care where you were born, and I know better than you all about that. You can take it from me that Valentine's Hope is not at all a nice sort of place to die in. When your time comes, you'll go like the rest of us, but I don't mean to be the medical man to sign your death certificate."

"It's a ghastly nuisance, going away for my health; I never have done it."

"It's most necessary, indeed, it's imperative."

"Well, I'll go to London for a bit."

"No, the South of France is about your ticket."

"No, Doctor, I absolutely decline the South of France under all or any conditions."

"What's the matter with the South of France?"

"Too gay, too noisy, too rowdy, know too many people."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well then, you'd better go to Egypt, you can't get very far wrong in that climate. Go to Cairo, make that your headquarters—excellent hotel, I was there last year, and from there you can settle yourself in any of the small places on the Nile that happen to take your fancy, in fact, you can go right down to Khartoum if you like. Yes, Egypt's about the ticket for you. Of course, there's the alternative of the Grecian Archipelago, but that would not do you as much good."

"I'll go to Egypt," said John Valentine shortly, "I'll go to Egypt. I shall hate it, but I'll go."

Mrs. Druce received the news with unbounded satisfaction.

"It's the right thing, Master Johnny," she said, "and I suppose I can give Watson instructions to get your things ready? How soon did the doctor say you might go?"

"He didn't say."

"Well, you'll want your things getting ready, and Watson may as well know first as last."

"Oh yes, you can tell Watson."

Now it happened that Watson was the only link that was left to John Valentine of his life in Blankhampton, for with that curious inconsistency that moves most of us in the great epochs of our lives,

he had, while deliberately cutting every tie that bound him to the regiment, retained his soldier servant. That had entailed buying Watson off, which would have been considered a most stupid proceeding by most people. But Watson knew his master's ways, having been with him ever since he had first entered the Army. To him Mrs. Druce addressed herself when she left her young master's presence.

"Oh, Watson," she said, "I've got great news for you."

"Yes, mum." He was a wise young man who had always managed to keep on the blind side of his master's old nurse. "And what may that be?"

"Dr. Clifford is most insistent that the master shall go abroad at once."

"That's good hearing," said Watson, who was a little tired of Valentine's Hope under present circumstances.

"Yes, it's good hearing, you're quite right. He's going to Egypt as soon as he can travel."

"Egypt! Oh, that's prime. You happen to be going too, Mrs. Druce?"

"Me? Go along with you. What would I be doing in Egypt? If Mr. Valentine were to be taken ill, I should go to him whatever part of the world he happened to be in or whatever it cost me. But he isn't going to be ill; the doctor recommends the climate of Egypt to make him quite himself

again, and in the ordinary course I shall stay here as I've always stayed, and I'll trust you, Watson," she went on, lowering her voice to its most confidential tone, "to let me know at any time if you should be really uneasy."

"I will, mum," said Watson.

"You know Mr. Valentine inside out. You know what's happened?"

"Well-nigh everything," said Watson.

"Well, then, if you should be uneasy in your mind, remember you've got to let me know first of anybody. If he should be ill Egypt isn't too far for me to go and nurse him."

"Right you are, mum," said Watson cheerfully.

The doctor finally gave John Valentine leave to start on his journey, but he qualified the permission in a very definite manner.

"Look here, John," he said, "you're going by way of London?"

"I am, Doctor."

"Well, you won't get larking about in London?"

"I must stay a day or two."

"Why must you?"

"I haven't any clothes fit for hot weather."

"That means you'll stop a fortnight."

"Oh no, only a few days. I must have linen suits and suitable things—you know the regular clothes that a man does have when he winters in Egypt."

"Well, promise you won't stay a fortnight."

"Yes. I shall only stay a few days. I'm not so fond of society that I shall run the smallest risk. But I can't go to Egypt without garments, that's quite out of the question."

To tell the truth, the doctor enlisted the assistance of Mrs. Druce, and on the evening of Valentine's last day at home the old lady broached the subject.

"Master Johnny," she said, "you'll not run any risks in London, will you?"

"No, Nursie, I won't."

"You won't go into stuffy theatres or to crowded parties or go driving in the park?"

"I've not the smallest intention to going to crowded parties, nor shall I drive in the park or go to stuffy theatres. Rest assured, Nurse, you can tell the doctor I'm not going to be a fool to myself. Why, my dear Nursie, do you think I don't know that he put you up to that idea?"

"Master Johnny!"

"Oh yes, it's a little crank of the doctor's that I'm not able to go out by myself—not fit to be let out alone, ha! ha! I've had a sharp turn," he went on more seriously, "but I don't want to have that experience again. I'll take care of myself, never fear."

And so, in truth, John Valentine did take care of himself. He stayed a few days in London, taking life very, very quietly, and scarcely going into his club at all. That was because he was not keen on meeting any Service men that he happened

to know, and at last he and Watson went off one morning at ten o'clock from Victoria, crossing from Dover to Calais and reaching Paris in time for dinner.

Somehow there seemed to be a great load taken off John Valentine's mind. Whether it was the clearer air of Paris, or a feeling of gaiety about the streets he did not know, but he felt lighter at heart than he had done at any time since he had parted from Lettice.

And they had meant to spend the first half of their honeymoon in Paris!

To tell the truth he had some notion, a very faint little flower of hope that was tucked away somewhere at the bottom of his heart, that Lettice and her brother might be in Paris. He knew he would not meet them in London, so he had not even kept his eyes open there, but in Paris he felt somehow nearer to Lettice, and feeling nearer to Lettice, I need hardly say that he was happier.

Still, he was extremely conscientious, he did not play fast and loose with his time, but after three or four days in Paris he turned his back upon it and continued his journey.

In due course he found himself in Cairo, with excellent accommodâtion at Shepheard's Hotel, and the very first evening at dinner, just as he sat down in the place indicated by the head waiter, somebody clapped him on the shoulder and a familiar voice exclaimed, "As I live it's John Valentine!"

## CHAPTER XXIV

JOHN VALENTINE looked round with a start as he heard himself familiarly accosted as he sat at the dinner table. He encountered a pair of merry blue eyes set in a well bronzed face.

"Why, Suds," he exclaimed, "you don't mean to say you're in Cairo?"

"Of course I am. What good or ill wind has blown you here?"

"Well, I'm here for my health," said John Valentine modestly.

"Your health! That's a good joke. Your health, did you say? And what have you been doing to it to have to come to a place like this to get it mended?"

"I've chucked the Service," said John Valentine.

"Chuck'd the Service! You don't mean that?"

"I do."

"Whatever did you chuck the Service for?"

"Because I got sick of it."

"Well, there's no telling what a man will or won't do. Well, I'm jiggered! Why, I thought



you were a soldier man who was going to live in a mess-room and die in a barrack cot, I did indeed. So you've chucked the Service and you got tired of it, well—I'm shot!"

"That's about it," said John Valentine deliberately.

"Ah, well," said the other, "you're a beastly rich chap, you can afford to do as you like. If you were a poor devil like me without two six-pences to rub together you'd sing another tune my dear fellow, you'd sing another tune."

"How many gees have you got out here, Suds?" asked Valentine irrelevantly.

"Ah, now, that's just a question. Donkeys are the great things out here, donkeys are grand. I once had an idea that a donkey was the sort of thing that you only saw in a tinker's cart, or a coster's barrow. It's only when you come out here that you realize what a donkey can be."

"Have you got any donkeys?"

"A few. Oh, I'm hard up, my dear chap, in fact, I'm stoney broke, but one's got to be in the fashion, you know, and donkeys are cheap. There's only one drawback to having a donkey. They're so intelligent that you feel that something dreadful will happen when you go away and leave them. Of course, I don't go away for week-ends as some people do. The fellows here never seem happy unless they're chipping off somewhere. Now, when I get to a place like Cairo I like to

stick in it until I've seen my way right round it."

"How long have you been here?"

"Oh—three years, off and on."

"Three years—so! Surely you've been home?"

"Oh yes, I've been home, but not for week-ends, don'tcher know."

"And you like it? You look awfully fit."

"Fit! My dear chap, you can't be anything else in this climate—unless you're a fool."

"How a fool?"

"Oh—be careful what you drink, that's all."

"Oh, I see. Never were a drinker, were you, Suds?"

"No, no, my vices don't lie that way. Well, you'll have a gay time, you know."

John Valentine hesitated. "Suds, if it's all the same to you, I haven't come to Cairo for a gay time. I want to be quiet. I've had a beastly lot of that sort of thing in England, and I want to keep myself pretty much to myself."

"Well, there are a great many fair charmers in Cairo—by the bye, old chap, didn't I hear something about you being engaged to be married?"

"I daresay you did, but I'm not engaged to be married, and I'm not thinking of being married at present."

"Really? You don't say so! Curious how rumours get about," said Suds, whose real name was Clarke-Williams. "I always did think you were an unlikely sort of chap to put your head in the

noose so soon, but I suppose we shall all come to it sooner or later," he went on in a tone of magnificent superiority.

"I suppose so. In the meantime, old chap, I'm not anxious to meet my fate in Cairo, and I'm particularly keen on making as few feminine acquaintances as possible."

"All right, that's easily arranged. I don't think there's anybody in Cairo who's worth your notice. A few Army women—none of them up to much—they're all so madly in love with their husbands that no other fellow stands a chance of so much as passing the time of day with them, and really, one cannot imagine a greater nuisance than to know a lot of women who are dead gone on their own husbands. They're so—er—"

"Get along," said John Valentine in infinite amusement.

"Well—I can't think of the right word—it isn't exactly tiresome, but it's something of the nature of tiresome."

"A little bald, perhaps," said John Valentine.

"Yes, in its effect on outsiders, it is perhaps a little bald—very bald, I might say."

"But surely there are lots of people staying in Cairo who are nothing to do with the Army?"

"Oh, my dear chap, any amount of them, Americans by the dozen. If you want a rich wife, you've only got to look around. You don't, of

course, but if you did, there are always shoals in a place like this."

"And why haven't you secured one?"

"Ah, that's because I've been hard hit in another quarter, beastly hard hit."

"You don't say so!"

Viewed in the light of his own trouble, young Clarke-Williams began to have a value quite apart from himself.

"I never but once saw a woman that I really wanted to marry. I'd just made up my mind that I'd talk to her seriously about it when L'Estrange of your regiment came and completely cut me out."

"L'Estrange! You don't mean to say that L'Estrange was ever gone on anyone?"

"Gone? Absolutely moony, gone to the last extent of goneness."

"You don't say so! And who was the lady?"

"There's no secret about it, so there's no breach of confidence in telling you. Her name was Adair, Carmine Adair."

"Oh, I've heard of her, I fancy I've seen her."

"Very likely. Well, I wanted Miss Adair to wife, and I wanted her very badly. L'Estrange turned up and I never had a look in afterwards."

"And why didn't L'Estrange marry her? Didn't she like him?"

"Well, I rather think she did, but there came along a German prince of sorts, a beastly rich chap, and mamma thought her little girl stood a good

chance of the running. I never knew why it didn't come off with the German prince, but it didn't, and she's Carmine Adair still."

"That was very hard lines."

"Sometimes," Clarke-Williams went on, "these old soldiers over-reach themselves. Lady Adair was an old soldier if ever there was one. I always felt," he said seriously, "that if there could be any compensation for losing the girl one wanted, I got mine in missing Lady Adair for a mother-in-law. She would have been a great trial. I remind myself of it a great many times a day. A man told me not long ago that she is losing her looks very fast—Carmine, I mean—but I can't credit it, for she was awfully pretty—a dainty little thing with deep red hair and violet eyes—oh, she was a dainty little creature."

"And poor old L'Estrange didn't pull it off."

"*I* didn't pull it off," said Suds plaintively. "*I* had first innings, *I* was the first one who wanted to make her mine. Poor old L'Estrange, indeed! You don't say 'poor old Suds!'"

"Well, Suds, somehow it doesn't seem to fit you, that kind of romance. I suppose you will get married one day, and I suppose your wife will be damn fond of you, but——"

"But *I* was damn fond of *her*."

"Oh, *I* know. If you had been you wouldn't be talking about it now. No, my dear chap, it's no use wearing the willow to me, it won't do.

Why," he went on, as the other opened his mouth to speak, "do you know that L'Estrange, who is my most intimate friend, never said a word to me about this woman whom you say he was fond of. Now I thought that L'Estrange was pretty much gone on somebody quite different, but he never opened his mouth on the subject, never spoke of either of them."

"Ah, well, people take things differently. I've got a frank and open disposition."

"I see. Well, your frank and open disposition hasn't suffered much by having been doubly cut out."

"Well, old chap," said Clarke-Williams, "I never had much sympathy with the blooming martyr; I always feel that, somehow or other, they deserve all they get, and as other people may feel the same about me, I never come the blooming martyr over them. It was only in the ordinary course of conversation that I happened to tell you anything about Miss Adair, for instance."

"Oh, I see," said John Valentine. "But I don't think, my dear Suds, that I'm going to waste any particular pity or sympathy over you. All the same, I'm awfully pleased to find you in Cairo, particularly as you don't want to introduce me to a lot of feminine society. Not that I despise ladies, bless 'em, I love 'em, but I'm not a marrying man, at least, I'm not going to marry anybody in Cairo. I suppose you know all the

things one ought to see as well as anybody."

"Oh, perfectly well, I'm a regular blooming guide. When everything else fails I shall get myself up as a dragoman and have a very smart dabhia, and I shall escort parties of ladies up as far as Khartoum. I shall have a little twang-twang as we go along, I shall have an excellent *chef* and charge big prices, and I shall marry the richest heiress that I take. See?"

"A very good plan. In the meantime, the sooner I go out and do the pyramids the sooner I shall get it off my mind."

"Well, we'll go to-morrow if you like."

"All right."

"No, it will have to be the next day, I'm on duty to-morrow, and to-morrow is Sunday, so make it Monday."

"You'll call for me here?"

"Yes. By the bye, will you dine with me to-morrow night?"

"At mess, of course?"

"Yes. It's better than doing nothing."

"I've come to Cairo to do nothing."

"Oh yes, of course, I forgot. What are you going to do after dinner?"

"Haven't thought about it."

"Well, I'll take you round to the most amusing café in Cairo, if you care to come."

"I should like to."

So the two men finished dinner, and after taking

their coffee strolled out in the direction of what Clarke-Williams called "the most amusing café in Cairo." It *was* amusing, John Valentine recognized it, and knew that not so long before he would have revelled in its frivolities and its general riskiness. As it was it seemed to him quite flat, just as, so far, all that he had seen of Cairo had done.

While they sat there a man and a woman came and stood outside and began to play, at least, the man began to play the violin and the woman stood by and presently went round with a little black velvet bag in which to collect donations.

"Hullo!" said John Valentine. "Who's this chap? He can play."

"My dear fellow," said Clarke-Williams, "five years ago he was at the very top of the tree. He's going fast in consumption. It's only by continually coming to Cairo that he keeps alive. You know, he's never been taught, he's a Hungarian gipsy. That woman who's with him—perhaps she's his wife, perhaps she isn't—idolizes the very ground he treads on; she can't make money, he does that, but she can bolster him up, fag for him, arrange for him, scheme for him, love him. I pity that woman. Look at his face, so splendidly handsome, so hectic with the shadow of what is coming. She's always so bright, so cheerful, so affectionate, and yet every day is one less, every scrape of the violin is one docked off the tale of what he will



live to play. I pity that woman ! It's a tragedy. I sometimes wonder what will become of her when he's gone, where she'll go, what she'll do. There was a chap here the other day called Wilson. Somebody said very much what I've said to you and he said, ' Oh, she'll get another Johnny.' I don't believe it. It isn't often you see the real thing. There are plenty of marriages, plenty of love affairs, but there are very few great passions. That woman has the stamp of great passion upon her."

"Suds," said John Valentine, "you're getting above yourself."

## CHAPTER XXV

It must be confessed that on the whole John Valentine was not prepossessed by anything he saw in Cairo, and he was very thankful to have found an old friend and schoolfellow quartered there, one who would give him enough of his company to prevent him from brooding over what seemed to him to be the inevitable. At the same time it cannot be denied that the healing effects of time and of change very soon began to tell upon him. He was less gloomy, less misanthropic, he took more interest in what he saw around him, although what he saw around him did not in truth interest him. This sounds like a paradox, but it is absolutely true, and if you think for a minute or so you will see the reasonableness of my argument.

It happened one day that he and Clarke-Williams were sitting outside a café when a party of tourists came along and sat down rather near to them. Among them was a girl who brought John Valentine's heart fairly into his mouth, for she reminded him not a little of Lettice.

"I wonder who that girl is," he muttered in

an undertone to Clarke-Williams when he had stared at her for some minutes.

"Oh, strangers, tourists, Americans by the general cut of them," said Clarke-Williams in the tone of a man who knew what he was talking about. "Why, what makes you ask?"

"She's rather like a lady I know, that's all," said John Valentine, in as careless a tone as he could assume.

"She's a bit like a lady I know," said Clarke-Williams, "but I don't think we're thinking of the same."

"Who was your lady?" asked Valentine.

"Mine? She was a Madame Von Zeidel."

"Von Zeidel—never heard of her."

"No, unless you'd been in Cairo you hardly would."

"Why? Was she well known here?"

"I don't know that she was," said Clarke-Williams in a tone of complete indifference, "I don't know that she was, I doubt if she had any existence either before or after her winter here. She's an attractive girl, that one. Shall I find out who she is? Would you like to know her?"

"Not for the wide world," said John Valentine in a tone of absolute alarm, "not for the wide world. I loathe picked-up people, and as I told you when I came here, I don't want to know anyone socially at all, and especially tourists."

"Well, you're a tourist yourself, if it comes to that," said Clarke-Williams.

"Yes, I know I am, and I don't want to know any more—especially if they're anything like me. And I never get on with Americans."

"Oh well, you needn't make a favour of it," said Clarke-Williams in his most flippant tones. "I wasn't anxious to know the lady, I didn't want to know who she was. She'll get to know me fast enough." At which John Valentine burst out laughing in spite of himself.

A little later he found himself thinking, ere he turned in for the night, of the curious coincidence, that he should see someone like Lettice and that Clarke-Williams should, in the same lady, recognize a strong likeness to a friend of his own. He had thought that Lettice was of a most rare type of womanhood, yet evidently there were at least two others whom she markedly resembled. Well, the world could not have too much of a good thing, and this glimpse of Lettice, as it were, only served to make his memory more keen, to make her image more distinct, and the knowledge of her loss come back to him with renewed bitterness.

But still he did not give up hope of finding her and, when he had found her, of winning her for his wife.

Although he had so scouted the idea of making the American girl's acquaintance, yet from that moment he took an intense interest in her. She

was actually staying at Shepherd's, so he had ample opportunity of watching her, and believe me, he made the most of them. He moved his seat at dinner, aye, and at lunch, so that he could watch her without seeming to show any particular curiosity, and he even found out one or two cafés and places that she and her party were in the habit of frequenting, and he used to go to them just so that he could study the turn of her head and get, as it were, a breath of Lettice. But, somehow, he never wanted to know the girl herself. She was attractive to him merely because of her reflective value. For one thing she had not a particularly pleasant speaking voice, and, as I have said before, one of Lettice Charteris' chief charms had been in her well-modulated and musical tones. To John Valentine now it seemed as if her speaking voice had been her greatest beauty.

Now all this time I need hardly say that John Valentine was in the hands of the doctor, and the doctor told him quite plainly that unless he took the greatest care of himself during the next three months he would certainly lay the seeds of a complaint which might prove his death. So John Valentine, who had taken his old nurse's remarks very much to heart, lived the quietest of lives, and in no way played fast and loose with himself.

It was not very long before the American girl became acquainted with John Valentine's friend,

Clarke-Williams. She was very American and somewhat outspoken.

"Say now, Mr. Clarke-Williams," she remarked, "I'm sure you'll tell me what's been puzzling me for a long time."

"Well, if I can, I will, Miss de Mexter; of course I will."

"I imagine you will," said Miss de Mexter; "you look to me the sort of young man who goes about doing kind things to other people. Eh? Well, what I want to know is, who is your friend?"

"A—h!" said Clarke-Williams with a comprehensive accent.

"Now, why do you say 'Ah' with that peculiar significance? He's staying at our hotel, he goes moping about by himself, morning, noon and night. I just wondered who he was, that was all."

"Yes, of course, I know you wondered who he was, and equally of course that is all. Well, Miss de Mexter, he's a man who has just left the Service."

"What Service is that?"

"The Military Service, Miss de Mexter, and he's come here for his health. Yes, I believe he is rather ill, something wrong with his lungs."

"You don't say!"

"Well, I do say," said Clarke-Williams, "but I don't say that he's got consumption or anything of that kind. He's been laid up with a sharp

attack of pneumonia, and one doctor sent him here and another is keeping him here, whether he will or no."

"He seems a melancholy sort of man," said Miss de Mexter.

"Would you care to know him?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I don't think I would. I find life quite melancholy enough without taking him on, thank you. And I shouldn't think he exactly wanted to know me or else he would have taken steps to that end. I've never been reduced to running after a beau yet, and I certainly ain't going to begin in Cairo."

At this point Clarke-Williams was seized with a fit of laughing which threatened to plunge him into hysterics.

"Now, why are you laughing?" said the girl, turning her shrewd, bright eyes upon him.

"Well, if I tell you the truth, Miss de Mexter, I was laughing at my thoughts."

"Were they too rude to bear repetition?"

"Too uninteresting," said Clarke-Williams. "My thoughts are never rude, and between ourselves, I don't think it's very kind of you to hint that they are."

"Did I? Now I think that's your conscience," said she coolly. "I don't think I hinted at anything, but one never knows with you British people what you're driving at or what you want. As for me, I'm interested in your melancholy friend, but

I'm not sufficiently interested to want to know him, and that's just the state of the case. Say, Mr. Clarke-Williams, did you ever meet anybody just like me? "

" Well, yes."

" Oh, you did. Who was she? "

" No one you were ever likely to have known, Miss de Mexter."

" Oh! "

" Do you know Prince Von Zeidel? "

" Yes. I met him at Carlsbad last year. He told me I was more like a lady he had known than anybody he had ever seen."

" Oh, Von Zeidel told you that, did he? How curious! "

" Did you know that lady? "

" Perhaps."

" What was her name? "

" I really can't tell you."

" You know that Prince Von Zeidel arrived yesterday, don't you? "

" Prince Von Zeidel? "

" Yes, he arrived last night."

" He's not at your hotel? "

" Yes, he slept there last night. I know because I heard him order his rooms, but he's not staying there permanently, at least I think not."

" Did you like Prince Von Zeidel, Miss de Mexter? "

" Well, Momma rather likes him, but as I said, ' Momma, you're Prince mad.' "



"That sounds as if you didn't."

"Well, between ourselves," she said, dropping her voice to a confidential whisper, "I thought he was a prize beast, but that's not for general publication."

"My dear Miss de Mexter," said Clarke-Williams, "I will keep it as a little edition de luxe confined to two copies."

"And that rather sounds as if you agreed with me," said Begonia de Mexter quickly.

"I agree with you, and I agree with you again, and I more than agree with you," said he. "I hope you'll have as little to do with Von Zeidel as possible. And you're quite sure you wouldn't care to know my friend, John Valentine?"

"Oh, John Valentine—that's his name, is it? A vurry nice name too. All the same, I don't think I'll trouble you to introduce us, because we shan't be so vurry long in Cairo now."

She moved away with a perky little nod; then she turned back, coming quite close up to Clarke-Williams.

"If I tell you the truth, Mr. Clarke-Williams," she said, "I've got a John Valentine of my own at home. Momma, I admit, would like to see me Princess Somebody or other—it doesn't much matter who—but as I told her last night, if it'll make her any happier and satisfy her any more, when my John Valentine and I get married we'll buy ourselves a title. There are plenty going around."

## CHAPTER XXVI

CLARKE-WILLIAMS very soon found out that Miss Begonia had not been mistaken when she had said that Prince Von Zeidel was not remaining in Cairo. He did stay two or three days, but he was bound for a trip up the Nile and only remained in Cairo sufficiently long to make his arrangements for the journey.

Clarke-Williams, although he heard of him, never happened to set eyes on him, so that he was not able to bring home to him by the circumstance of Miss de Mexter's extraordinary likeness to Lettice Charteris, the fact that nobody in Cairo had forgotten the existence of the English lady who had borne his name a couple of years before.

John Valentine, although he actually more than once spoke to Von Zeidel during the few days that he was at the hotel, did not take any interest in him, and was never even aware of his name. Now, it happened that he was very keen himself to take a trip up the Nile, and he invited Clarke-Williams to accompany him, and Clarke-Williams, who was a gay soul and liked a bit of pleasure, got a few days' leave and gaily went along to enjoy himself to the full.

When they were two days' trip from Cairo, Clarke-Williams had need to write some letters.

"I say, old chap, can you give me a decent pen?" he asked. "Heaven knows my handwriting is no great shakes, but the pen I found on my writing table is too appalling."

"Take one off my desk," said John Valentine, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "Isn't there one there? No? Well, just look inside my cabin, there's a silver pen on the tray on my dressing table."

So Clarke-Williams went for the first time into the apartment where John Valentine slept, and there on the locker beside his bed stood a photograph of Lettice in a large silver frame. He forgot all about the pen in his astonishment, and after a minute he strode back to where John Valentine was still sitting.

"I say, old chap," he began.

"Well, what is it?"

"You—you never told me you knew Madame Von Zeidel."

"I don't," said John Valentine.

"But her photograph is in there."

"Don't know the lady."

"But, my dear fellow, I know the photograph; I've seen it before."

"Nonsense."

"I tell you I do. That's Madame Von Zeidel—in the silver frame."

"Ah, you said that American girl was like a Madame Von Somebody-or-other," said John Valentine. "Now, oddly enough that is a photograph of the lady that I told you was so like the American girl. *You* said she was like Madame Von Somebody—Von Zeidel, was it? Well?"

"My dear John, that is a photograph of Madame Von Zeidel."

"Nonsense, nothing of the kind. If you must know, that is a photograph of Miss Charteris."

"Miss Charteris—never heard of her. *That's* Madame Von Zeidel—stake my life on it. She hated being photographed."

Now this happened to be exactly what John Valentine had heard Lettice say more than once, and from the start he gave, Clarke-Williams saw that he had struck a chord of recognition.

"I see that you do know her."

"I assure you," said John Valentine, "that that is a photograph of Miss Lettice Charteris."

"Lettice Charteris—where have I heard that name?"

"Oh, likely enough you've heard it somewhere. Anyway, although the likeness may be very strong, you must accept my assurance that it is Miss Charteris and nobody else."

"My dear chap," said Clarke-Williams quietly, "that photograph is a portrait of a lady who was well known in Cairo two years ago—or stay, I don't know that she was well known. She was

known to some people, myself among them. Her real name we never knew, she was called Madame Von Zeidel when she was here. Von Zeidel was the German Prince who so completely cut out our mutual friend L'Estrange with Lady Adair's little daughter."

"You're making a mistake," said John Valentine hoarsely.

"I am making no mistake."

"Take care what you say."

"There is no need for me to take care. I knew that lady, the original of that portrait, not intimately, but well enough for her to give me one like it. When we get back to Cairo, I can show it to you, I can prove it, I can produce it. It was taken at Tours."

John Valentine felt the smart little cabin begin to spin slowly round and round, for the photograph was one which Lettice had given him with a playful pretence of making a great favour of it.

"My dear John," she had said, "I hate to give you a photograph that is years old, positively the last remnant of my school days. I will have one taken for you."

"No, I want that one, it's more like you than the modern ones. I should love to have it," he had said.

And so she had yielded. Many others she had given him, but that old-fashioned one so unwillingly bestowed had, from first to last, occupied the

premier place in his estimation, and since the day it had become his own he had never passed a single night without having it for company.

He knew that for Lettice's sake he must do nothing which would give her away, he knew—oh, men and women have instincts sometimes as true as those of a dog or a Red Indian—he knew that he was going to turn down that mysterious page in Lettice's life which would give him some clue to the reason for their separation. Still he retained sufficient control over himself to know that he must not, by word or look, convey more than he could afterwards take back.

"My dear chap," he said, "I admit that the likeness must be quite extraordinary, but that photograph was not taken in Tours, it was taken in England; I must ask you to accept my word for that. You tell me that the lady you called Madame Von Zeidel—you said in speaking of the likeness to the American girl that the lady you called Madame Von Zeidel was this Prince's mistress. *This lady*," with a gesture towards the inner room, "is a woman of high social position, a woman in the very best society, you understand. It is out of the question that there can be any possibility of their being one and the same."

Something forbidding in his tone warned Clarke-Williams that he must pursue the subject no further. At the same time he noticed—trust a man for that—that John Valentine did not take the

photograph out of its frame and so prove to him indisputably that it had, in truth, been taken in England. There are times when a man instinctively takes his cue from the person to whom he is talking, and this was one of those moments.

"Tell me about this Madame Von Zeidel. You spoke of her the other day in a tone of such pity. One doesn't usually pity that kind of woman."

"She wasn't that kind of woman," said Clarke-Williams, "she was a lady, essentially a lady, from the tips of her fingers to the points of her toes. How Von Zeidel came to get hold of her is more than I can tell. She kept very quiet in Cairo, very few people knew anything about her; I hardly know how I came to have the entrée to their house."

"Did she—was she here long?"

"Oh—well—I should say she was here about six months or so."

"I see. And the German fellow, was he fond of her?"

"No, I don't think he was fond of anybody—excepting Von Zeidel. He liked women in a wild beast, bludgeon sort of fashion. I gathered that he was jealous of her, that was all."

"And did she give you the idea of caring for him?"

"I think she was frightened of him. At all events they parted in a hurry. Her brother came and took her away, at least so I understood, but of course one never knows the ins and outs of these

things. Von Zeidel was a man who, although he was always tremendously civil to me, I could never, under any circumstances, have become intimate with."

"And there was a brother?"

John Valentine's tone was calm and collected, merely that of a man pursuing a conversation because it happened to be the conversation of the moment, and not because of any personal interest therein. "What was he like?"

"Never saw him," said Clarke-Williams. "I happened to have a touch of fever just at the time and I got no more than a message from her to say that she was going away and bidding me 'good-bye.'"

"And did she write, or how?"

"Oh no, she merely sent a message by one of the fellows who happened to see her the morning she left."

"Who was that?"

"Oh, a man called Smithers. He's gone out of this long since, exchanged into the other battalion and went to India."

"What was the brother's name?"

"I haven't the least idea. That was the question I put to Smithers. She spoke of him and introduced him as 'my brother,' nothing else."

It is no exaggeration to say that at this point John Valentine's heart sank to water within him. Of course, in spite of all his bluff he had realized



instantly that the photograph which had been the cause of the conversation had been one done very shortly before Lettice had left her convent at Tours, and that if Clarke-Williams had chosen to insist on taking it out of its frame he could have done nothing, and must thereupon have confessed at once that they had been speaking of the same person.

"I suppose you by no chance admired this lady yourself, Suds?" he remarked in the most casual tone that he could command.

"Not in that way, no. You see, I was heart-broken when L'Estrange came along and cut me out with little Miss Adair. I never quite got over it."

"I heard the other day that Miss Adair was still unmarried."

"And so am I, but I don't think, somehow, that Miss Adair will ever be Mrs. Clarke-Williams. In the first place her lady mother would have objections. She has ambitions for her daughter, and she is quite American in her tastes. Well, old chap, I'll go and get that pen if you'll excuse me."

He was already half-way across the narrow floor when John Valentine jumped up.

"Stay, I don't think I left it on that tray after all. I know where it is."

He followed Clarke-Williams into the sleeping apartment, and pulling open a draw in the dressing chest took out a thick-set silver pen.

"It's a pretty good nib," he said, handing it to his friend, "I was writing with it this morning."

"Thanks, old chap," said the other, taking it from him. Then he looked down at the locker where the silver framed photograph stood. "My dear fellow," he said, "I've seen likenesses before, but I've never seen such a likeness as that. When you come to my quarters again I'll show you my photograph of Madame Von Zeidel, and then we'll see if you don't say that I'm absolutely right."

"I shall be most interested to see it," said John Valentine, "and I've been most interested in the story you've told me of this poor lady. But do go and write your letters, old fellow, because Watson will be going off to post in half-an-hour or so."

Then Clarke-Williams went off to his own quarters and John Valentine sat down again in his big chair and slowly filled his trusty pipe.

So, his thoughts ran, as he puffed steadily away, that was the meaning of it all, that was the head and front and top and bottom of the whole mystery. Lettice, his Lettice, whom he had loved with all the passion of which he was capable, was, after all, a woman with a history! Now why, after having so successfully hidden the past, having so skilfully brought matters along to within a few hours of the wedding, had she not gone on? Once married, the past could have had no influence over her—at least, what he meant was that, once married,

however angry he might have been, he could not have undone the knot once it had been properly tied. Why had she not told him everything, confided everything to him, trusted to his honour—to his love?

Of one thing he was perfectly certain, that in all her life Lettice had never loved anyone as she loved him—oh, he was certain of it, every look, every gesture, even the break that had come between them, all pointed conclusively to the same certainty. The only mystery now was why she had thought it necessary to go away and lose herself, and lost herself she had, most skilfully and resolutely. And here he was floating on the bosom of the Nile, and a fixture for some months to come, because the doctor had got an idea that he was too delicate to be trusted at home again. “Such utter rot!” he went on vexedly to himself. Here he would have to stay, coddling himself to a ridiculous extent until that old fool of a doctor told him he could go away. Of course, there was no reason, if he chose to do so, why he should not go away that very evening; but no, he would run no risks. And now that he knew something of the truth he knew, too, that he must watch over himself, if not for his own sake, at least for hers.

## CHAPTER XXVII

It was a curious thing that John Valentine slept better that night than he had slept at any time since he had parted from Lettice. He felt that he knew the worst, and he felt, in some queer, indefinable way, that Lettice belonged to him now as she had never done before. He understood a thousand things she had said which aforetime had seemed to him curiously enigmatical. He remembered when he had expressed himself very strongly how her charming face had changed. He had only thought how sympathetic she was to those in less favoured circumstances, and living less sheltered lives than her own. And all the time his shafts had gone right home to that tender and trusting heart, and she had been afraid to tell him the truth.

He sat and thought it all out long after Clarke-Williams had gone to bed, and he realized that now he was face to face with the greatest problem of his life.

In his crude state he knew that he would have promptly declared it impossible for a Valentine, the head of the Valentine family, the master of

Valentine's Hope, the last of a long line of proud and brave men, to take one to be the mother of his children who had not always travelled by the straight path. He knew that he would have advised any other man to tear straight out of his heart the image of the girl who had bewitched him. But the knowledge came to him during that long night watch that in his case—or rather in hers—things were different. Lettice Charteris, whatever she had done, whatever had been her misfortune, could not be judged by the ordinary standard of womanhood. That she was as pure as a flower he was absolutely convinced. He argued that there are some natures so entirely pure and childlike that, though you drag them through the gutter, they can never be smirched or soiled, and Lettice was one of these. Never for one moment did he hesitate as to what he should do.

It was the first night for a very long time that he had felt genuinely sleepy.

"In the morning," he said, "I will write to a firm of private detectives, and they will find Lettice for me. I would go myself, but, after all, every man to his trade. I should be a fool at detective work, and little as I care for my own life, I'm not going to risk the life of Lettice's husband. So I'll just stay here quietly and get myself strong and well again, just myself, in fact, and that will give the private inquiry people time to find her."

Then he got into his little bed and slept the sleep

of the just, or at least, I ought more correctly to say he slept the sleep of one who is no longer made heartsick by hope deferred—one who knows the worst.

“Old chap,” said Clarke-Williams to him as they sat at breakfast the next morning, “what’s happened?”

“What can have happened? What are you talking about?”

All the same he knew what had happened, and why his old school fellow was surprised at his demeanour.

“One would think you had been left a fortune or found Paradise during the night—or some other unlikely thing. You look as fit as a fiddle—just as you used to look when we were little chaps at school.”

“Do I? I’m glad of it. I’ve always thought that the sick monkey sort of business didn’t exactly suit my style of beauty. And it’s all thanks to you for coming on this trip with me. I think,” he went on, “that the Nile would be an ideal place for a honeymoon.”

“Make it a *sine qua non* that you come here on yours,” said Clarke-Williams.

“Yes, but I don’t think somehow that I shall. When I get married I rather fancy I shall spend it at Valentin’s Hope. Yes, I know it’s a prosaic sort of thing to do, but there’s a charm about it.”

“Then are you thinking about it?”

"Well, not exactly thinking about it. I might do worse. I shall have to marry some day or other, a fellow owes it to his family."

"Well, you're a lucky devil; you can marry who you like. When I enter the holy state I shall either have to marry dibs, or make up my mind to rough it for the rest of my life. I don't like roughing it and I don't like marrying for dibs. I don't suppose I shall ever see another girl I really want, one who's got both dibs and charm. Ah, that old lady has got a lot to answer for."

"Lady Adair?"

"Yes, Lady Adair."

"Well, by all accounts," said John Valentine, "she wasn't by way of being a great match herself in her young days."

"Oh!"

"No, far from it. She was governess to the first Lady Adair's daughters, out in Mauritius or somewhere where he was Governor. Then Lady Adair died, and Sir Horatio, who must have been an old fool of the first water, went and married her."

"Oh, that's the story, is it."

"And now," John Valentine went on, "the most blue-blooded aristocrat and the most keen on the most eligible *parti* for her little daughter is my Lady Adair. Gad, even L'Estrange wasn't good enough."

"My dear chap," said Clarke-Williams, "did

you ever know a manufacturer's daughter who married a Hieland chieftain who didn't out-Herod Herod in the way of highland customs. The last time I was in Scotland I was staying at Invermurroch. Mrs. Mackenzie, who you know was somebody's pills, and whose money quite resuscitated the Invermurroch fortunes, outdid everything I have ever seen—she was too Hieland for any words to express. Gad, she was taking lessons in second sight ! ”

“ How did she manage that ? ”

“ Oh, I don't know—there's some old witch on the estate who's supposed to have second sight, and I'm blessed if Mrs. Mackenzie didn't have the old hag up to her private sitting room every morning of her life, doing crystals or something.”

“ No ! ”

“ God's truth,” said Clarke-Williams solemnly. “ Invermurroch himself is very funny about it. Of course, she's got money, but mind you, he's very fond of her. But he can't help seeing her little weaknesses.”

That morning John Valentine spent in writing to a celebrated firm of private enquiry agents in London. To them he gave every detail he could think of concerning Lettice and her extraordinary disappearance. He omitted nothing that could in any way help them, and when he had sent the letter he felt that now, indeed, he was in a fair way to finding her.



But easy as it is to give instructions, it is not always easy, even for private enquiry agents, to carry them out, and the days rolled into weeks and the weeks rolled into months—several of them—and still he had no information which could be called worth having. You see, as the detective gentleman himself said, the sleuth hounds were a little handicapped by so long a period having elapsed between Lettice's disappearance and the day on which they had received instructions to trace her. And as Lettice and Dick Charteris had laid their plans very carefully, their whereabouts was by no means easy to discover.

Still, he was cheerful, he did not lose hope. He knew that even if he were a couple of years finding her, that she would be Lettice Charteris still. He knew that she would never marry, he was absolutely certain of it, because he was certain that she loved him.

"You see," he argued to himself, "she is not like a girl who is dependent upon marriage for a position in life; she is well off, she can pick and choose—she can even afford to sit down and do nothing."

And John Valentine knew perfectly well that Lettice would do nothing in the way of choosing a husband.

During the whole of the time that he remained in Cairo he busied himself in collecting odds and ends for her. He was like the little maidservant who

starts a bottom drawer as soon as there is any prospect of her marriage; everything goes into it, everything that she can scrape together in the way of personal gear or household gear. And into a certain capacious trunk went all manner of odds and ends that John Valentine took pleasure in gathering together for the adornment of his future bride. What a collection of scarabaci of all sorts and colours, some in gem, some of sandstone, and some enamelled, were among his treasures! Then he suddenly bethought himself that Lettice's eyes were blue, and that turquoises would be eminently becoming to her. So he started to make a collection of turquoises. As a matter of fact he was frightfully cheated, but as an amusement it was worth it, as a solace it was worth it, and as a labour of love it was worth it most of all.

But still the days wore on and there was no news, and at last, when the weather began to get too hot, he said "Good-bye" to Clarke-Williams, turned his back upon Cairo, and went back to London. Once there he at once had an interview with the detective in charge of his business.

"Mr. Valentine," he said, "I'm really cut up that I can't trace the lady you are so anxious to find. If there was anything extraordinary about them it would be easy enough; if they were travelling under their own name it would be easy enough. But they are two ordinary well-dressed, good-looking young people, like

plenty of others who are travelling about the Continent to-day. They may have gone for a trip round the world, they may be on a yacht in the Adriatic, they may be in fifty places where we should never think of looking for them—they may be right under our very noses."

"I don't think they would be under another name."

"Well, all I can say is, if they're under their own name they're not in Europe."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've taken steps to ascertain the names of people staying at every hotel in Europe—oh, yes, it's a lot of bother, and it will cost you a good bit. But at the same time, I am perfectly certain under another name and that we've got to look for them outside Europe."

"Well, I don't care what you spend, but they've got to be found," said John Valentine quietly. "I shall not stay in London, Mr. Searcham, I shall go down to my own place to-morrow. If I don't feel perfectly myself there, I shall go abroad again. No, not to Egypt—too hot. I shall go somewhere where I can get some trout fishing. I'll acquaint you with my address, and you'll not let an hour pass if you have any news?"

"Not an hour," said the detective.

It was then about a quarter to one, and John Valentine cast about in his mind as he went downstairs as to what he should do with himself during

the rest of the day. Then he remembered that he had seen in some paper the previous evening that Lord and Lady Lucifer were up in town, and hailing a hansom he jumped in and bade the man drive to Matcham House.

He found Lady Lucifer at home and extremely delighted to see him.

"Why, John," she said, "is it possible that you really had to go to Egypt for the winter, or did you want to go?"

"My dear Violet, I had to go. I very nearly kicked the bucket."

"But why did you do it?"

"Ah, my dear Violet, that's a question. Ask me something that's easier to answer. As a matter of fact, I think I did a bit too much wild duck shooting."

"I see. Oh, you needn't look for Lucifer, he's out, gone somewhere after horses. He heard of some immense bargain that was going, and he and Barry Fane went off together ever so early, down to Buckinghamshire. They were going to stay lunch in any case. You and I will have a nice cosy little lunch together. No, the children aren't up, they are coming, but not for a week."

She talked on impersonal subjects as long as the servants were in the room. Then she handed him the cigarettes, took one herself, and having seen him fairly started, she planted her elbow on the

table and put a question to him which had been burning the end of her tongue ever since he had entered the house.

"John," she said, "I've never seen you—since——"

"Yes, I know."

"Do you mind talking about it?"

"I do to most people, but not to you."

"I'm glad of that, John. I've always been fond of you, I've always regarded you as one of my best pals. Why did she do it, John?"

"I don't know."

"Of course, you're certain of one thing, that she really was fond of you?"

"Oh yes, she was fond of me."

"To go right away—to take her home up by the roots like that—to clear out of the town, bag and baggage—people haven't done talking about it yet."

"I suppose not. That, in fact, was why I chucked the Service. I couldn't face going back to Blankhampton and having all the young ladies doing the silent pity towards me, so I cleared out of it."

"And got ill," said she.

"Well, I didn't get ill through that, I should have got ill through the things I did even if my marriage hadn't been put off."

"But," said she, "you wouldn't have done the things you did."

"No, I suppose not," he said with a sigh.

"Do you think," she went on presently, "that Lettice was—all right?"

"All right—what do you mean?"

"Now, don't be offended. I was very fond of Lettice, and I liked the boy, too. They were a nice, good-looking, wholesome, well-placed pair, but common sense tells me that it must have been some very strong reason which made them give up their charming home, and all the friends they seemed to value so much and go wandering about under another name."

"How do you know," said John Valentine, "that they are wandering about under another name?"

## CHAPTER XXVIII

JOHN VALENTINE sat bolt upright in his chair.

"Violet," he said, "how do you know that Lettice and Charteris are going under another name?"

"Well," said Lady Lucifer, "it was like this. I was over in Paris—I always go to Paris at this time of year to get a few frocks and things, as you know, John—and one day I was lunching by myself—Lucifer was somewhere or other, not with me—when Bobby Charlton came across from his table. 'I'd no idea, Lady Lucifer,' he said, 'that you were in Paris.' 'Well, I always come to Paris at this time of year to get frocks and things,' I said. 'Ah, well, it's natural you would, you're a well-dressed woman,' said he. I said, 'Are you alone?' 'Yes, quite by myself,' he answered. Then said I, 'Come and lunch with me, and we'll have a talk.' The waiter changed his belongings and he came to my table. He told me he'd been seedy and had been down South. 'I always, about twice a year, seem to hear the South a-calling,' he said. 'Ah,' I said, 'that's because you're a gambler.' 'No,' he answered, 'I'm not a gambler, my worst enemy couldn't say that of me, but I seem to want to get the southern sun into my

bones, and to have a few days' flutter. I'm soon satisfied. It seems to take all the creases out of one.' 'And did you win or lose?' I asked. 'Well, I won rather a lot,' he said, 'enough to bank home, and whom do you think I happened to see this year?' 'Nay, how should I know.' 'That young Charteris I met at your house a year ago.' 'Ah, did you,' I said, 'was he at Monte Carlo?' 'No, not at Monte Carlo, he and his sister are staying at a little place on the coast.' "

"But what about his going under another name," said John Valentine.

"Yes, that was what I said," returned Lady Lucifer, "but it didn't come out just then. Billy Charlton sat back in his chair and looked at me rather doubtfully. 'I met Charteris and his sister at your house, Lady Lucifer,' he said. 'Yes, they stayed at my house several times,' I answered. 'Well, do you mind telling me whether they've come into more money or whether there's something against them.' 'What do you mean?' I asked. 'Well,' he said, 'they're not under the name of Charteris now, at least they were not when I was at Monte Carlo a few days ago.' 'Are you sure?' I said. 'Oh, perfectly certain. As a matter of fact,' he went on, 'a man came up to Charteris and addressed him as Crew.' 'And what did he look like, caught out?' I asked. 'Not a bit,' Billy Charlton replied, 'he was perfectly unmoved. That made me think that everything was not quite square and above-board, only having



met them at your house I thought you wouldn't invite them without knowing all about them.' 'Of course I know all about them,' I said, for I shouldn't have given it away if I had known there was anything against them after having had them at my house. At the same time, John, what is it? "

"I don't know," said John Valentine, "if I knew I would tell you. As it is—I—I'm on the track of them. I shall marry Miss Charteris as soon as I find her."

"No matter what has happened? "

"No matter what has happened," said he steadily.

"But you may find out something."

"Of course I may, but I shall marry her all the same."

"Oh, well, if you feel like that there's nothing more to be said. Well, my dear boy, they're living somewhere near Monte Carlo, not at Monte Carlo, but somewhere not a hundred miles away."

"I'll be off there to-morrow."

"Of course, they may have moved. They may be travelling about, they may be up in the mountains, or they may be down on the coast where it is not so baking."

"And he called him Crew? "

"Yes. Billy Charlton said that the man was a very smart man and seemed very intimate with him."

"Well," said John Valentine, "I don't know

that that particular bit of information will help me. I can't go down to the Riviera and ask every smart man I meet if he knows a man named Crew. I believe the lunacy laws are rather queer both in France and Italy, so I might get landed between the two of them."

"And you'll start—when?"

"As soon as I can get some money out of the bank and arrange with the invaluable Watson to put my things together. Probably to-morrow. By the bye, Violet," he said quite seriously, "if I find her and marry her, you'll stand by me?"

She looked at him doubtfully. "Well, in the abstract, yes; but in real life, I have Lucifer to consider, and his notions are old-fashioned. If there has been a scandal about Miss Charteris—and I can't think of any other reason which would make her efface herself so persistently—oh, *I* would, *I* would, I'm a broad-minded woman, a very broad-minded woman, but I prefer everything to be open and above-board, and Lucifer, dear fellow as he is, has an absolute craze on the subject of implacable respectability. I consider he is rabid on the point. Even when his own cousin, Florence Mendlesham, got put away by her husband, Lucifer refused to allow me to have anything to do with her again. I've never seen her since, poor dear, and I was very fond of her," Lady Lucifer went on, "and everybody knew that Lord Mendlesham was a beast—and I told him so myself. And

I said to Lucifer, 'You must clearly understand one thing. I won't receive Florence if you don't wish it. If I meet her, poor dear, I shall cut her as dead as a door nail, but I shall write and tell her why, and I absolutely refuse to receive that dreadful man Mendlesham or to acknowledge him in any way.' 'A very much wronged man,' said Lucifer. 'That's as may be,' said I promptly, 'but I never myself knew a really nice man who divorced his wife, and I never care to know them afterwards.' Ah, John, it is you men who make the laws for us poor women to keep; and having made them you can break them, but we—but it's no use going into that now. The question is, if there's anything against Miss Charteris and you marry her, I shall not be able to receive her, it's out of the question. If there's nothing serious, nothing that Lucifer is likely to hear about, I will be everything that you could wish."

"And you call yourself a moral and respectable woman!"

"Oh, perfectly so," said Lady Lucifer with emphasis. "There never was a person on earth, John, so strict, morally speaking, as I am. But, of course, one's husband's prejudices are his prejudices, and being one's husband, they must be respected."

"Oh, of course, of course. I wonder," he remarked with a grim sense of humour, "if Lettice will ever deceive me like that."

"Deceive you!" cried Lady Lucifer. "I've

never deceived Lucifer in my life, never. Didn't I distinctly tell you that if there is any scandal I shouldn't dream of asking Lucifer to allow me to receive her. For one thing, I know what his answer would be, and for another thing, I couldn't afford to have my little girl mixed up with anything that wasn't quite, quite, quite—you see? John," she said, "do you know whether there's anything really serious?"

"No, I think the thing was a huge mistake, that's all."

"My dear boy," said she, "only royalties go about incognito, and then everybody knows who they are. In our class of life that sort of thing savours of the impossible. I don't want to be unkind, I'm your nearest relation, but do think what you're doing. If you think her love is more to you than your position, and all that sort of thing, there's not another word to be said."

"My dear Violet," said he, looking straight at his cousin, "if every single being in the world were against her, I would still make her my wife. She is the only woman in the world for me; she is as pure as snow, as dear as Heaven—and she's going to be my wife."

"In that case, John," said Lady Lucifer, "it's no use arguing the question any further. You must let me know when you have found her just what I am to do. I have told you the restrictions on my side, and I leave it to you, to your honour,

not to let me be mixed up with anything unpleasant."

Half-an-hour later John Valentine left Matcham House. Outwardly he was calm and perfectly unmoved; inwardly he was like a raging volcano. He hailed the first cab he saw and bade the man drive to his hotel. There he gave some hurried orders to Watson, and putting his cheque book into his pocket, he drove off to the bank. There he drew a hundred pounds in bank-notes and told them that he was going abroad, that he did not know exactly where he would be.

By that time it was nearly the dinner hour. He had promised to dine at the Carlton with a man of the old regiment, and having satisfied himself that Watson would be ready to leave by the boat train from Charing Cross, he went off to his dinner in as happy a mood as he had known for a long time.

"Old chap," said he, when he and Marsland were discussing their first course, "you won't be offended if I run away rather early?"

"I thought perhaps you'd go out with me, I've half-a-dozen parties to go to."

"It's awfully good of you, but I'm going to Paris to-night."

"Oh, are you? In that case you won't want to be trotting round to a lot of stuffy receptions in London."

"What do you do it for?" asked John Valentine rather grimly.

"Well, I don't make a practice of it, but when I get ten days' leave I like to make the most of it and see everybody I know. Besides——"

"Yes, I know. You've got a special attraction and you'll strike her track at one of these gatherings. I know, old chap, I've been there."

"Oh, have you? By the bye, why are you going to Paris?"

"Oh, business, purely business."

"Business! Didn't know you had gone in for anything of that kind."

"Oh, private business," said John Valentine, laughing a little. "No, I'm one of the few men I know who haven't gone into business. You see, I haven't got coal or iron on my place, nor, as far as I know, tin or gold, and I don't feel inclined to start a dairy farm or a cheese factory."

"Ah, you've got plenty of money without."

"I suppose that's it. By the way, Marsland, who's that little lady at the table by the window, the one with the elder woman and the two men?"

"That's Miss Adair."

"Oh, it is. Well, I wasn't quite sure. I've seen her, of course, but I couldn't quite see enough of her face to make sure. Who are the men with them?"

"The dark man is a chap in the Indian Civil who's home on leave, the other is a German, Prince Von Zeidel."

"Oh—that's Von Zeidel, is it?"

"Why, what do you know about him?"

"I heard a good deal about him when I was in Cairo."

"Yes, he was out there. He cut L'Estrange out with little Miss Adair."

"Yes, and he cut out another man whom I know in Cairo who's very bitter about it, which is more, by the way, than L'Estrange is."

I can hardly tell you with what mixed feelings John Valentine sat and eyed Von Zeidel.

"The women," young Marsland went on, "seem to find him extremely attractive. To me he is an absolute brute."

"Oh, absolute!"

"Then, of course," Marsland continued, "he is enormously rich, which does make a certain amount of difference."

"All the difference," said John Valentine.

The chief thought that was running in his mind was how Von Zeidel, having once had Lettice in possession, could have turned from her to a little pert, snub-nosed creature like Carmine Adair, with her red, red hair, touched up to the fashionable tint, and her pert little nose and her eyes, which though large and bright, lacked depth of feeling. Well, there is no accounting for these things, and John Valentine acknowledged it to himself as he talked to his host, and every now and then he choked down a curious and natural feeling that he wanted to walk across the room and strangle the life out of the big German.

## CHAPTER XXIX

By midnight John Valentine was well on his way to Paris. He felt this time that he would, by some chance or other, find Lettice at the other end of the journey. He knew that he had no real clue to go on, but the conviction was very strong upon him, and so his heart sang as cheerfully as a little bird in the bright sunshine.

At Dover Watson came to him, and the bright look in his master's eyes did the faithful valet's heart good.

Watson adored John Valentine. Watson could have told the story, and sometimes did, of a terrible time when he, a close prisoner, had sat in the cells and, so to speak, prayed that he might curse God and die. And then John Valentine, who was the second in command of Watson's troop, had come with his off-hand, brusque manner, and his cheery, devil-may-care sentiments, and had bidden the soldier cheer up and believe that no real harm would come to him, if he had no real harm to answer for. With John Valentine's interest things had not gone very hardly with the young prisoner, and then he had become Mr. Valentine's batman.



It is easy enough for a man in a cavalry regiment when he has the special protection of an officer. But the happiest day of Watson's life had been when his master had bought his discharge and they had turned their backs upon Blankhampton and the Scarlet Lancers for ever.

So Watson, who knew better than anyone else in the world what that master had suffered, rejoiced when he saw the look on his face as he gave him orders to cross Channel that night. The satisfaction on John Valentine's face grew more apparent at each successive stage of their journey. They stayed the night at the Continentale and the following day resumed their journey South. It was already very hot, and by the time they reached Nice, almost intolerably so, but John Valentine pressed on, not staying at Nice, until he found himself in the lovely island which lies like a jewel in the blue waters of the Mediterranean.

I hardly know what he expected to find. Possibly that Lettice would be waiting for him on one of the marble terraces of the greatest casino in the world. But there was no sign of Lettice, or of Dick Charteris either. He went to all the hotels in Monte Carlo, thinking it just possible that they might have shifted their quarters and come to stay in the town itself. But he was mistaken, there was nobody of the name of Charteris or of Crew. Then he pursued his peregrinations into the mountain villages high up above the sea level. He did find

in the inn of a pleasant little village some fifteen miles from Nice, a Mrs. St. Leger Crew, but on investigation she proved to be an elderly lady of literary tendencies, and he retired from that day's quest mortified and baffled.

Then he became somewhat unwell, and Watson persuaded him, just for form's sake, to consult a doctor. The doctor told him, very naturally, that he had not exactly chosen the right place, and that the best thing he could do would be to get back to England again.

"I have important business that will keep me in this neighbourhood for some time," said John Valentine, who did not mean to budge an inch.

"Gambling?" said the doctor enquiringly.

"No, not gambling, Doctor; I'm no gambler. I've got to stay here for some little time, until, as a matter of fact, I find somebody of whose whereabouts I am not sure."

"Put the whole affair, whatever it is, into the hands of a private enquiry agent, who will use people who are accustomed to the neighbourhood and whom the climate will not affect."

"No, no, Doctor, I'm going to do my business myself. If you can give me a tonic to buck me up, I shall be eternally grateful to you. If not, I will bid you 'Good-morning.'"

"Hey-day, hey-day," said the doctor with a jolly laugh, "I perceive, Mr. Valentine, that you are a young gentleman who likes his own way."

"I do that same," said John Valentine, "sometimes. I'm not always death on my own way, but on this occasion I can't afford to go yours. Give me a good strong tonic, Doctor."

"Well, I'll give you a tonic, but all the tonics in the world won't make the sea coast suit you at this time of the year. If you must stop in the neighbourhood, get up into the mountains. I'll give you something to take that will help you to pull yourself together, but don't sleep down in Monte Carlo on any account whatever."

So John Valentine moved up to a little hostelry, as our American cousins put it, way up in the mountains, and then the faithful Watson felt more at peace. But he did not find any trace of Lettice and her brother, although they thoroughly searched the neighbourhood, going to every village, and making enquiries at every inn.

At last John Valentine, who had early in the proceedings made, to a certain extent, a confidant of his servant, acted on a suggestion of Watson's.

"Excuse me making so bold, sir," said he, "but to my mind you're not going on the right tack altogether."

"How, Watson? Why?"

"Well, sir, I look at it in this way. Mr. and Miss Charteris have took another name."

"Well, I'm not sure."

"No, sir, but you believe they've taken another name. Now it's no use, if they've taken another

name, looking for them under the name of Charteris or Crew."

"Why?"

"It's waste of time, sir. You've got nothing but chance to go upon."

"Well, sir, I'd leave it to chance."

"What do you mean?"

"It's like this," said Watson. "If a soldier wants to find out, say, who's stolen part of his kit, or whether he'd better follow one line or another, he doesn't trust to his own judgment."

"What does he trust to?"

"Well, sir, he trusts to the Bible."

"The Bible! As how?"

"Supposing a soldier wants to find something out—well, sir, he just takes the Bible and lets the pages open where they will, and then he trusts to whatever clue he gets."

"Now, I wish you'd be a bit more explicit, Watson."

"Now, sir, here's a Bible; I never move anywhere without one. Just hold it in your hand a minute or two, think of Miss Charteris, and then let the book open of its own accord."

"It seems rather silly," said John Valentine, "rather a weak, backboneless way of doing things."

"Can't do any harm, sir," said Watson mildly.

"No. Give me the book."

He took it and held it between the palms of his

hands, thinking hard all the time of Lettice, then he let it open just where it would and waited for further instructions.

“Don’t look at it, sir, just put your finger where you will on the page.”

He followed out this instruction also, and Watson, leaning over him, read, “And though they hide themselves in the top of Carmel I will search and take them out thence.”

“Pooh! There’s no clue there,” said John Valentine bitterly.

“Not so fast, sir. Perhaps there may be a clue. Yesterday I got talking to Lord Edensaw’s valet. They came to the villa down in the village a few days ago, it belongs to them. I asked him in a casual kind of way where we should go if we wanted to get off the beaten track a little, and if there were any other places to stay at besides the hotels and inns. ‘Well,’ said he, ‘if you want to get right off the beaten track you’d better get taken in by one of the Carmelite communities, there are plenty of them about, and they all take guests.’ ‘You mean to say,’ said I, ‘that they all keep hotels?’ ‘No,’ said he, ‘but they all take guests, people who don’t want to go to hotels, who want to keep quiet.’ I thought, sir,” ended Watson, “that it sounded very like our ticket.”

“Right you are, Watson, but there are Carmelite communities everywhere. It’s a difficult question to know which one to choose.”

"Well, sir, try the same system."

He offered the Bible again for his master to take, and John Valentine, thinking hard of Lettice, held it for a few minutes and then let it fall open. It opened at the fifth chapter of Nehemiah, and John Valentine, without looking, drew his finger down the page, stopped short, and read aloud, "Their olive yards."

"Where do they grow olives, sir?"

"At Lucca."

"And where is Lucca?"

"Lucca is in Italy."

"Then sir, I should advise you to go to Italy."

"Very well, I'll take your advice, and if I find Miss Charteris at Lucca, or anywhere near Lucca, I'll give you a tenner for yourself."

"Thank you, sir," said Watson, "I think you will find Miss Charteris somewhere near Lucca."

"Well, we shall see, we shall see."

Accordingly, the next day to Lucca they went, hope once more high in the ascendant. But at Lucca they were doomed to disappointment, for although they searched the town thoroughly and traced out every English visitor, they did not find any couple answering to the description of Lettice and Dick Charteris.

"Watson," said John Valentine, "I'm afraid your chance of that tenner is very slender."

"No," said Watson, "we shall find them somewhere hereabouts."

It was the man's calm belief that gave John Valentine courage at this point to go on, and together the two men began to explore the country round about, going to every inn and to every Carmelite community that they could hear of.

"There is a Carmelite community where they take visitors at Riretto," said one reverend mother whom they interviewed. "Yes, I take visitors, but not gentlemen; I have several English ladies under my roof, but not one named Charteris."

"It is possible that this lady might be in one place and her brother in another. This lady is tall and fair, with chestnut hair, and very blue eyes."

"No, my English ladies are not like that. They are all dark—brown, at least—and they have the medium height. If the persons you seek are in any Carmelite community it will be at Riretto."

"Thank you, madam," said John Valentine gratefully, "to Riretto I will go."

"Now, this Englishman," said the reverend mother, to the janitress, "who is he seeking for? What is it? Is he police? I have heard that the English police are quite gentlemen. Is he police, I wonder?"

But the janitress shook her head. She knew nothing and cared less.

Meantime John Valentine, keeping a brave front, but feeling very sick at heart, went back to the inn and demanded some knowledge of the way by which Riretto could be reached. He found that

it was five or six miles further inland than they were at that moment, and that for a consideration he could have a carriage which would take him, his servant and his belongings to the principal inn at Riretto.

He decided that they would at least have breakfast before they went, but two hours later they were on the road to the land of good hope. They did not reach their destination till hard upon dinner time, for the way was rough and hilly, and the horses were not of that kind which is able to stand much fatigue. So it was seven o'clock when they rumbled into the cobbled courtyard of the inn. A smiling hostess came out and bade them welcome, and to her John Valentine addressed himself in such Italian as he could command. She was quick to grasp his meaning, and told him she had a charming bedroom, and that he was just in time for dinner. She added that she had a waiter who could speak English, and indeed, called him in corroboration of her assertion.

On the whole John Valentine would rather have conducted his business with the hostess herself, but that, of course, was not a matter of great importance. He saw Watson and the little waiter who could speak English—just enough to swear by—safely away with the evident intention of settling his rooms for the night, and then he addressed the landlady.

“I want to see the visitors’ book,” he said.



She was puzzled. He took a pencil out of his pocket and made the motion of writing. She gave a gesture of comprehension and brought him writing materials.

"No, no," he said, shaking his hand to show that that was not what he wanted. "No, not that, not that."

Then he seized a pen and drew a book and made believe to write his own name in the book that he had drawn. She gave a little laugh of amusement and ran away and fetched the visitors' book of the establishment.

There were, thought John Valentine, points about the little waiter who understood English.

Then he inscribed his name and began to examine the names of the other visitors.

"Three," said the landlady, holding up three fingers. "Lady, like me"—making a gesture to indicate large size, and then he understood her to say that there were a brother and sister in the house.

He turned back the page with avidity. Yes, there in Lettice's well-known handwriting was the evidence of what he sought.

"Mr. and Miss Charteris. Maid and valet."

## CHAPTER XXX

JOHN VALENTINE pointed to the entry.

"Still here?" he asked.

"But yes," said the landlady, "of course."

She pointed upstairs, and even as the words left her mouth, John Valentine became aware that he was actually in the presence of the faithful Charles.

"Hullo, Charles," said he.

"Mr. Valentine—sir—I'm glad to see you," said Charles with a smile so beaming that John Valentine instantly conceived an idea that things had not gone well with Lettice since their parting.

"Does Miss Charteris happen to be in, Charles?"

"Miss Charteris is dressing for dinner, sir."

"Does she dine in the public room?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"Been here long, Charles?"

"No, sir, a very short time."

"Should you think I could see Miss Charteris, or Mr. Charteris?"

"Mr. Charteris is away, sir, for a few days. He's gone to Florence on business."

"Then Miss Charteris is alone? Do you think I could see her?"

"Yes, sir, come this way."

He bestowed another beaming smile upon the hostess, and with much deference led the way upstairs and showed the visitor into a sitting-room in which a huge fire was burning. It was tenantless, but Charles went to the door of an inner room and knocked imperatively upon it. It was opened by the redoubtable Pinkey.

"Is Miss Charteris dressed?"

"Yes. Why? The dinner bell hasn't gone."

"No, the dinner bell hasn't gone, but if you'll ask Miss Charteris to come here for a minute——"

Pinkey shut the door, but it was opened a moment later, and Lettice, wearing a black tea-gown, appeared in the doorway. She uttered a stifled little scream when she saw who was standing on the hearth. Then she stepped forward into the room, and Charles judiciously effaced himself by slipping into her bedroom and shutting the door with a resolute click.

John Valentine made one step forward. "My darling, oh, my darling!"

For a moment Lettice looked at him incredulously.

"Oh, John, my John—oh, my love, you shouldn't have come here."

"Shouldn't have come here! This is the one place in the world where I ought to come, where

I ought to have been without having to seek you. Don't tell me you're not glad to see me."

"Glad to see you! Do you realize all that I've been through. Look at my hands—my arms—they're very thin, aren't they?"

"Thin! What has Charteris been doing to you?"

"Dick? What should he do to me? What has Fate done to me—Fate?"

"Oh, I've come to put all that right."

"John, you think you've come to put it right. My dear boy, nothing can put it right. It's all wrong, it's been wrong all the time. I—I couldn't tell you."

"You should have told me; you shouldn't have left me to find out from others."

"Find out—what?"

She spoke quite sharply and looked at him apprehensively.

"Well," he said slowly, holding her very fast, and looking down into her troubled eyes, with a cool and self-possessed gaze, "I may as well tell you, I know pretty well the whole outline of the story."

"What!"

It seemed as if her brain reeled.

"You know—about—"

"Yes, I know pretty well everything."

"And you—what are you here for? Why have you come—oh, I can't say it."

"No, I wouldn't try if I were you. I've come here—I've been seeking you for weeks and months in the full knowledge of the past—and I've come, not to ask you to be my wife"—she shrank back as if he had struck her a deadly blow—"I haven't any need to ask you that question again, and if I had, you are not a fit judge of how to answer it. I've come to tell you what you never gave me the chance of telling you before, that I decline to accept the freedom you so generously and so very foolishly offered me in Blankhampton. And we're going to be married as soon as the necessary formalities can be gone through. No, no trousseau or anything of that kind. You'll have plenty of time to send for the things you had got ready before. The dresses, Miss Charteris, madam, will be a little old-fashioned, but I shall love you in them perhaps more than I did when they were made."

"John," she said, "do you realize what you are saying? Do you mean to tell me that you are still asking me to be your wife?"

"I am."

"Although you—you know—everything?"

"Pretty well everything."

"You know that I was Von Zeidel's"—she waited a minute, and then whispered the word, "his—mistress."

"Yes, yes, I know that too. I've seen the brute."

“ And you still ask me to be your wife ? ”

“ Certainly. I don’t ask it, I insist upon it.”

“ Have you any relations—no, you haven’t any relations, John, excepting Lady Lucifer, who could advise you.”

“ No, I don’t take advice from any man or from any woman, not even from you. Here I am, I’ve tracked you out, hunted you down, and I’ve got you—and I’m going to keep you until we go back to Valentine’s Hope together. Now, listen to me once and for all. I’ve tried living without you. When I met you I would have said it was an impossibility for me, John Valentine, of Valentine’s Hope, to marry any woman who had any sort or kind of a history. I believed it, in the ordinary way I should probably have acted up to it. But I’ve tried living without you—and I can’t do it. I don’t care what happened in the past, you are still to me the purest woman who ever lived. For the rest, I don’t want to discuss your past with anyone, and I’ll take deuced good care that no one ever discusses it with me. Now, does that satisfy you that I am a serious person to be seriously dealt with, that I mean to stand no nonsense. And now, Miss Lettice Charteris, if you please, what have you got to say to me for the wicked way in which you’ve treated me, for the way in which you brought me to the very brink of the grave. And you never gave me a chance of proving whether I was a lover worth having, or a mere pailful of

water with a little oxygen and lime thrown in."

"I haven't anything to say," said Lettice. "I did it for the best, believe me I did it for the best."

"Well, we'll concede that, you did it for the best—a mighty poor best, let me tell you. And now, Miss Charteris——"

"Oh, don't call me Miss Charteris."

"Ah, now you're coming to your senses. Do you know, my dearest, that I'm very, very hungry, and that you have got to be fed up, being little else than skin and bone, and that the dinner bell went some minutes ago. Now, I feel perfectly certain that that excellent landlady has something quite good in the way of soup, to begin with. Shall we go down together? Because if we do, I should like to dry your eyes as a preliminary proceeding. I don't want the good lady who runs this house to imagine that I've been beating you, or even bullying you. So put on your prettiest smile and kiss me just once, or perhaps even twice, and we'll go down and have dinner together."

"But there is so much I ought to tell you."

"And you shall tell me, every blessed thing that will ease your mind, but don't tell anything to a famishing man when you are, although you pretend not to be, a famishing woman."

Then he kissed her a great many times and drew her gently towards the door.

"After dinner," he said, "you shall tell me every detail once and for all, and then we'll put

it away and bury it as completely as if it had never happened."

As they reached the lower part of the house on their way to the dining-room, John Valentine perceived Watson talking to the radiant Charles and the demure Pinkey. He stopped, still holding Lettice's hand very tightly.

"I'm sure," he said, looking at Charles, "that you will be glad to hear that there has been no break in our engagement. Watson, I haven't forgotten."

For a moment the three, being English, were almost too thunderstruck to speak. Then Pinkey made a step forward, and caught Lettice's hand and held it against her breast, looking up at her with streaming eyes.

"Oh, ma'am, oh, Miss Charteris, I'm so glad. I never was so pleased to see anybody in my life—not even my husband."

"What, Pinkey, have you got married?" John Valentine exclaimed.

Pinkey blushed and Charles looked conscious.

"Oh, I see. Well, Miss Charteris and I must go out to-morrow and buy you a wedding present. As for you, Watson, I shan't forget."

The ring in his voice was triumphant, and he gently drew Lettice on her way.

Oh, what a dinner it was! John Valentine called for the best that the house contained, begged the assembled company to drink wine with him at



his expense, ordered lavishly for the three servants and sent a bottle of the best wine in the house to the landlady with his compliments, and finally retired back to the cosy little sitting-room alone with Lettice.

"Now," he said, "this isn't half a bad little room. This couch is quite comfortable, but it's not in the right place. This room has never been tenanted by people who love each other, at least, not as we do. I'll just turn the couch so that we can see the apple wood spitting on the hearth, and get the smell of the pine cones wafted towards us every now and then, and we'll sit here and we'll talk and talk and talk."

"But," said Lettice, standing up before him and looking down upon him, "there's one thing that I must tell you before anything else. I must tell you the details of my connection—with—with Prince Von Zeidel."

He caught her by her two wrists and drew her down beside him.

"Your place, if you want to tell me anything about that scoundrel, is not standing before me like a suppliant, but sitting beside me like an equal. If you want to get it off your mind, tell me; if not, I shall never ask you a question about it."

"I would rather tell you. It does justify me a little."

"Well then, tell me. Let's get it over and done with."

"I ought to have told you," said Lettice, "before I allowed myself to become engaged to you. I tried—oh, how I tried! I couldn't get the words to come, they seemed to stick in my throat, to make my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, and the moment I began I felt as if my bones had turned to water. I was wicked, I was foolish, I let myself be drawn into an affair with this man, he seemed so big and brave and strong to a school girl in a convent. I had seen nothing of the world, it had been years since I had had a home; the Sisters seemed so narrow, so silly—you don't know how silly nuns can be, nobody does who has not lived with them. He seemed to be a door to freedom and to life, to the world. I knew, of course, that I should have been most severely punished if it had been known that I was in the habit of meeting him. He told me that everything would be all right, that he would get me down to the coast before I was missed, that to avoid pursuit and to spoil all trace of our route he would take me on board his yacht, right round to Hamburg, and that he would take me to his mother and we would be married. I didn't understand what men could be; I didn't know that a man would make a girl, while he kissed her, promises that he never meant to keep. I believed every word he said—he seemed so noble, so splendid, as though the whole world would fall down and worship him. So I left the convent. I laid my plans well and

carefully, I just wrote a letter to Dick that I could post before I went on board the yacht, but I never left a word for the Reverend Mother or any of the Sisters or the girls—oh, it was wicked, it was wicked—and I was punished for it. We made a railway journey down to the coast, I don't even know the name of the port at which the yacht was waiting, and we went on board and set sail for Germany, for the port of Hamburg. But we never got there, we never touched German soil. Week after week we cruised here and there, I never even knew the names of the ports at which we put in—I was quite alone, there was no one in whom I could confide. At last I grasped that I had been trapped, that I should never get to Hamburg, should never see Germany, should never be the Princess Von Zeidel. What I suffered! Month after month went by, and I never set foot on shore. I realized too late what I had done, how wrong I had been to put my faith in Prince Von Zeidel. He loved me, but not quite well enough to make me his wife. It was weeks after I left the convent that I realized that I had never known what love was, that my feeling for this man had been one of excited romance, merely a desire for freedom, a desire to get out of the convent into the fresh free world. I was horrified when I knew what I had done, but I had no chance to get away, no choice, no free will any more. I was like a poor little fly in a spider's web. I hated him, I hated

him so much that though he had loved me madly to begin with, by the time we had got to Cairo he did not love me any more, and I thanked God for it. Oh, I remember so well one day that I went out by myself to the Pyramids. I wanted to sit out there and think things over. I hurt myself that day, I twisted my ankle and I was frightened of the men, the rough men out there. I had a lot of beautiful rings on, I thought they meant to kill me. Then Mr. L'Estrange came along, I didn't know him, but he rescued me from them; he told me that he would see me home, and he walked beside my donkey, half holding me on. And then we met Prince Von Zeidel—oh, he was so angry! Why? Why? Why? One never knew why he did anything, he had long since ceased to care for me, he was madly in love with a little English girl, Carmine Adair. He was so rude to Mr. L'Estrange and he was brutal to me, and when we got home—he struck me.”

John Valentine held her very closely. “I almost wish you hadn't told me this,” he said hoarsely. “I saw that man at the Carlton the other night. I wanted to get up and kick him. All the time some instinct said to me, ‘Go and kill him.’ Now I know. What did you do?”

“I made up my mind that night that I had two courses open to me, one to kill myself. At first I meant to kill myself, but life is sweet and I am young, I didn't want to die, to die with all that

on my conscience. So I wrote to Dick. I expected that he would cast me off, but I didn't understand Dick any more than I had understood Von Zeidel. Dick came as fast as rail and steam could bring him. He is older than I, he is a man of the world, he bearded Von Zeidel, he forced him down to the very ground. Oh no, he didn't quarrel with him, but he pointed everything with a little steel revolver and, like all bullies, Von Zeidel was a coward at heart. Dick made him pay over the money that made my settlement, he told him it was only due that he should pay for what he had done, although nothing could make good the injury. Then we went away from Cairo, and I thought that we had turned our backs upon my wretched past for ever. I never meant to marry, I thought that in Blankhampton no ghost out of the past would rise up to terrorize me. Then when I found that Mr. L'Estrange was one of the new regiment I wrote to him—oh, I couldn't bear the suspense of waiting to see whether he recognised me, I thought I would grasp my nettle straight. I did everything I could to remind him of Cairo and the Pyramids, but he remembered nothing."

"But what made you go away as you did?"

"Because someone who knew you, who knew that I was going to be married to you, had known me in those old days at Cairo. If I had not told you he would have done so. John, I am very sorry, I was a coward, I hadn't the courage to tell

you all that I have told you now, and so I thought if I went away, if I left no trace behind, you would forget."

"And this arm," said John Valentine, holding up a fragile and transparent wrist, "is the result. Now let me thank you, my dearest, for your confidence. Let us never mention the subject again. There is just one point that I would like to speak of. It is that I wouldn't care for my wife to have any money that had come from Von Zeidel. Make it over to your brother, he stood by you in your worst hour of need, he stood by you when you thought it right to leave Blankhampton. I believe in the wicked suffering for their wickedness, and a brute like Von Zeidel should not get off scot-free in such a case as this. Make the money over to Dick. Where is he? When will he be back? How soon can we be married?"

THE END



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### CONTENTS

- I. PRELUDE.
- II. THE SUPREME FACT OF THE UNIVERSE.
- III. THE SUPREME FACT OF HUMAN LIFE.
- IV. FULLNESS OF LIFE—BODILY HEALTH AND VIGOR.
- V. THE SECRET, POWER, AND EFFECTS OF LOVE.
- VI. WISDOM AND INTERIOR ILLUMINATION.
- VII. THE REALIZATION OF PERFECT PEACE.
- VIII. COMING INTO FULLNESS OF POWER.
- IX. PLENTY OF ALL THINGS—THE LAW OF PROSPERITY.
- X. HOW MEN HAVE BECOME PROPHETS, SEERS, SAGES, AND SAVIOURS.
- XI. THE BASIC PRINCIPLE OF ALL RELIGIONS—THE UNIVERSAL RELIGION.
- XII. ENTERING NOW INTO THE REALIZATION OF THE HIGHEST RICHES.

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PAGE 145.

What one lives in his invisible, thought world he is continually actualizing in his visible, material world. If he would have any conditions different in the latter he must make the necessary changes in the former. A clear realization of this great fact would bring success to thousands of men and women who all about us are in the depths of despair. It would bring health, abounding health and strength to thousands now diseased and suffering. It would bring peace and joy to thousands now unhappy and ill at ease. . . .

PAGE 180.

. When apparent adversity comes, be not cast down by it, but make the best of it, and always look forward for better things, for conditions more prosperous. To hold yourself in this attitude of mind is to set into operation subtle, silent, irresistible forces that sooner or later will actualize in material form that which is to-day merely an idea. But ideas have occult power, and ideas, when rightly planted and rightly tended, are the seeds that actualize material conditions. . . .

PAGE 144.

Thoughts of strength both build strength from within and attract it from without. Thoughts of weakness actualize weakness from within and attract it from without. Courage begets strength, fear begets weakness. And so courage begets success, fear begets failure. . . .

PAGE 50.

The only thing that any drug or any medicine can do is to remove obstructions, that the life forces may have simply a better chance to do their work. *The real healing process must*

*be performed by the operation of the life forces within. . . .* There are almost countless numbers to-day, weak and suffering in body, who would become strong and healthy if they would only give God an opportunity to do His work. To such I would say, *Don't shut out the Divine inflow.* Do anything else rather than this. Open yourselves to it; invite it. In the degree that you open yourselves to it, its inflowing tide will course through your bodies a force so vital that the old obstructions that are dominating them to-day will be driven out before it. . . .

PAGE 72.

Fear and worry and all kindred mental states are too expensive for any person, man, woman, or child, to entertain or indulge in. Fear paralyzes healthy action, worry corrodes and pulls down the organism, and will finally tear it to pieces. Nothing is to be gained by it, but everything to be lost: . . .



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